

BEADLE'S Dime New York Library

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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXXII.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., October 13, 1886.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 416



MONTE JIM LIGHTLY GRASPED ALVA PENNINGTON'S WRIST, AFTER THE FASHION OF
A DOCTOR, AND SAID, "I THOUGHT SO! FEVERISH—DECIDELY FEVERISH!"

By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.,
AUTHOR OF "NOR' WEST NICK," "OLD '49,"
"A ROYAL FLUSH," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. A PACK OF WOLVES.

A PASSENGER train was pounding along over the Northern Pacific Railway, in the days not long gone by, when the iron trail was pushing its way into the heart of the continent; when each temporary stopping-place became a "city," springing up in a night and vanishing in a day, when the "end of the road," took another jump toward the Pacific ocean. Very brief of life were the majority, but, if short, their existence was a merry one. "Red-hot and chuck-full of fun," with plenty of "dead men for breakfast," and marvelously flourishing graveyards.

At the time of which this chronicle treats, Bismarck was the terminus of the eastern division of the road, and, though "built to stay," as the vernacular hath it, the namesake of the German prince then possessed all of the peculiarities which mark the strides of the giant horse. Thieves, gamblers, cut-throats; soiled doves, red-beaked vultures, crafty hawks; each and all of the predaceous tribes had representa-

tives in the "wild and woolly" city by the Big Muddy.

Eastern roads have been but little troubled with that bitter curse of their Western relatives, three card-monte. It seems to flourish best on the verge of civilization, where all men are too wholly absorbed in personal affairs to care for what befalls their neighbors. At all events, each new road had to pass through the same attack, which only ceases when the preliminary work is completed, and there is time for taking breath and looking around. Then comes the fight, generally short and sharp, but decisive. But during the interim the hungry birds of prey feast right royally, and their course is plentifully marked by aching hearts, ruined homes and prematurely filled graves.

The Northern Pacific in this respect was only second to its brother, the Union Pacific. Hardly a passenger train could complete its "run" without being "worked" by at least one regularly organized gang of three-card-monte men.

On the train which more nearly interests us at present, a pack of these human wolves were plying their calling, after the fashion which has so often been described, yet which so rarely fails to meet with complete success.

At the station last passed the party boarded the train, and a disgusted brakeman pointed them out to two passengers with whom this story will have much to do, giving names and pedigree of the leader, declaring that the chief, Monte Jim, was a most fitting successor to the notorious Canada Bill, whose name and marvelous skill have passed into history.

Frank Lisle and Alva Pennington, these two passengers had introduced themselves. The former was tall, handsome, with jetty hair and mustaches; richly dressed, yet with perfect taste; his age being about thirty, and his appearance that of a man who has seen a good deal of the world.

Alva Pennington was less noticeable. Barely over the medium height of man, he was heavily and awkwardly put together, giving him a slouchy appearance, despite his correct attire. If anything, his jewelry was too conspicuous, too massive.

His complexion was blotchy, his hair and whiskers of a dull, foxy hue, neither red nor yellow. His upper lip and retreating chin were smooth shorn. His age was apparently but a few years younger than that of his comrade.

Directed by the friendly brakeman, they closely scrutinized Monte Jim and his gang; and as the chief of monte-men has a prominent part to play in the story I have undertaken to tell, a brief description may not come amiss.

Monte Jim was tall, broad-shouldered, trim-waisted, with the torso and limbs of an athlete. In his present garb, of a genteel, neatly-fitting suit of black broadcloth, silk hat, kid gloves and white tie around his erect collar, he might have easily passed for either a fashionable minister of the gospel or an aristocratic pilgrim fresh from some Eastern city. The garb showed his symmetrical figure to perfection, though the close-buttoned coat gave him an air of stiffness which seemed to form a part of a preacher in holiday attire.

A perfect blonde, his skin seemed soft as that of a baby, being clear white and pink, but his features were clear-cut and manly; his nose long and straight, his forehead broad and high, his chin square and solid. Of his lips nothing could be seen, a heavy pair of mustaches covering them from sight. His eyes were large and of the deepest blue, filled with a fire that glowed, rather than sparkled. His hair showed traces of an inclination to curl, but was closely trimmed. It and his mustaches were of a golden corn color, soft and silken.

A roughly-dressed man with one blind eye, who appeared to be half-drunk; a tall, portly, soldierly-looking man; a brisk, impudent, off-hand fellow in the guise of a traveling salesman, completed the "gang," as exposed by the brakeman. In addition to these, two green-looking young men had entered with them, whom our two friends at once set down as the "pigeons" to be plucked, and as the one-eyed man, who called himself Blinky Scott, produced the "papers," they joined the little group, curious to see how the "racket" would be worked.

It was the old, old story; while the garrulous "cattle-man" was explaining the game to the "greenhorns," Major Dave Poole marked one corner of the winning card with a tiny cross, then bet that he could turn the winning card. Of course he succeeded, greatly to the amazement of the "drunkard." Then the two "suckers" tried their hand, winning by the same means. In a fit of pretended rage, Scott tore up the cards and flung them out of the window, producing a fresh pack of cards, still sealed. Tearing off the wrapper, he dropped off the first three cards, which were the ace, king and queen of hearts, crying:

"Durn the eagle-bird, anyhow. I'm a lady's-man, I be, an' I'm open to bet that I kin do the trick with the ole gal, ev'ry time! Look at the papers, gents, an' see that they're honest; then you fellers that's got some o' my good money, kin hev the rest ef you've got sand enough to swing out fer it with a long pole!"

A bright light filled the eyes of Alva Pennington as he caught up the cards, but it vanished almost as suddenly, as he passed them over to his fellow-traveler. An almost imperceptible motion called the attention of Frank Lisle to a tiny cut or notch which marked one corner of the queen of hearts. Neither of the other cards bore the mark, and it seemed to have been made accidentally in trimming the cards.

A warning glance from Lisle, then he passed the cards back to the garrulous drunkard, who swiftly manipulated them, then turned to the young man who had won his money, crying:

"Now's your chance fer to git rich, young feller! I'm a bull-dog that never loses his grip when once hauled up to the scratch! I'll keep on a-bettin' as long as my dust holds out, an' then peel off my rags fer a last stake! Money talks, an' mine says you can't turn up the pritty gal!"

Scott's whole attention seemed devoted to the young men who had once won from him, and his boasts grew louder and more offensive as they hesitated to accept his challenge. But at length one of them spoke out firmly enough:

"I reckon we don't want any more, stranger. Jim an' me ain't hogs, an' a hundred dollars in our pockets is wuth more to us then ten hundred to yours."

"Waal, ef you weaken, that's all right," with a sickly grin. "I ain't crowdin' nobody, an' ef your backbone's so stiff you can't stoop over to pick up a fortin' 'tain't fer me to say that you're pesky fools. You'd lose, sart'n sure!"

His eyes all aglow with the true gambling fever, feeling that he had a sure thing with the marked card, Alva Pennington forgot his resolution to "never bet on another man's game," and flinging off the warning hand which Frank Lisle placed on his shoulder, cried out:

"How much money have you got that says I can't turn up the queen of hearts? I don't mind trying it once, if you make the figures worth the trouble."

"That's white talk, an' hits me right whar I live! Nary a limit, bo s. I'm thoroughbred, an' kin kiver your own pile."

"Good enough! I'll bet you an even five thousand dollars that I can pick out the queen of hearts, first trial!" and, as he uttered the words, Alva Pennington dropped a roll of bills into the gambler's lap.

CHAPTER II.

MONTE JIM GIVES GOOD ADVICE.

A SHARP exclamation broke from the lips of Frank Lisle at the impetuous action of his friend, and he made an ineffectual attempt to check his hand.

"Are you mad, Pennington, to risk all on a single turn of a card? Don't be a fool! If you must bet, split up your stake."

"That's good advice, my dear sir," said a musical voice from close behind the friends, causing them to start despite of themselves; but Frank Lisle never once removed his keen gaze from the dealer and his cards, suspecting some attempt at disposing of the marked card, or other foul play.

Less strong-nerved, Alva Pennington flashed an angry glance over his shoulder, his lips parted in a savage snarl, as he recognized Monte Jim. A bland smile and low bow greeted him, and the mellow voice added:

"Pardon me for interfering, my dear sir, but I cannot help approving of your friend's advice. Better draw your money before Blinky Scott covers it, else you'll never take it up again. I speak as a friend, believe me."

"No doubt, but is it as my friend, or the friend of that fellow?" with a short, hard laugh. "There's my money; cover it or squeal 'Enough.'"

"If you insist, of course it will be covered," was the quiet response. "But perhaps you don't know the man you're bucking against."

"I know him, and I know you!"

"You are certain?" with a soft, peculiar smile.

"You call yourself Monte Jim, and that fellow is your dealer. You came here on the lookout for suckers, but you'll find you've staggered up against a whale before the end."

The gambler laughed softly, showing not the slightest trace of annoyance in either face or tones as he said:

"You are well posted, my friend. I believe your name is Alva Pennington?"

"That's no matter!" roughly retorted the youth. "My money talks plain enough, and that is all that concerns either of us at present. Is it a go, or a square back-down?"

"My dear sir, were your knowledge as thorough as you seem to think, you would know without asking that Monte Jim never dodges a bet while his bank contains a dollar. So much on that score. Now listen to me, though I dare say you will think me a fool for my pains."

"If I give Blinky the word to throw, you'll lose your money, sure as fate. It's a rule of mine to never thoroughly skin a man all over without first giving him plain warning."

"I know you now, better than you think, perhaps. If I had recognized you before, this seeming chance would never have fallen in your way,

because you are not the sort of man I like to do business with in this way."

"Too gritty to sit well on your stomach?" with a sneer.

"In your mind," with a mocking bow. Pennington flushed hotly, for, well acquainted with the current slang, he could not mistake the meaning conveyed by this terse phrase. His fist clinched tightly, and his arm drew back as though to answer the taunt with a blow; but Frank Lisle grasped the member in time to check it.

"One thing at a time, Al. These fellows think we've got them foul on the cards, and are only playing to change them, or to sneak out of letting against your money."

"Truly, a Solomon come to judgment!" laughed Monte Jim.

"In one word—will you play?" demanded Pennington.

"I don't want to win your money—"

"Or lose your own," was the swift interjection.

Monte Jim laughed shortly, his mustaches curling.

"That is out of the question, my dear sir. We deal monte to win, and never lose."

"Bah!" sneered Pennington, with a fling of his hand toward the young fellows who entered the car with the gang. "It is easy to say that, but these fellows can tell another story. They raked in one century only a few minutes since!"

"Who furnished those ducats, lads?" laughed the sport.

"You did, boss!" was the prompt response.

"Just so," smiled Monte Jim, plainly enjoying the amazement of both Pennington and Lisle, who had never suspected the truth—that these innocent-looking fellows were actually members of the gang. "The bait attracted you, just as was intended. I wish now that it had failed. As I said before, you are not the kind of game I care to tackle. You have put up all of your wealth, and if the cards are thrown, you can't help losing every dollar. When you lose, you'll kick worse than a Government mule on short rations."

"Not that I'd care much for that, ordinarily. It is part of the game, so far as the pigeons are concerned. But I'm in a peculiarly tender mood this evening, and would rather throw up all claim to the stakes than be obliged to listen to your mournful lamentations. It may be that my supper sits heavily on my stomach, but I give you a last warning—take up your boodle and count yourself just five thousand ahead."

"Hands off, curse you!" snarled Pennington, as Monte Jim stooped to take up the roll of bills; and as he uttered the words he thrust the muzzle of a revolver almost against the temple of the dashing sport.

With a motion swift as thought itself, Monte Jim grasped the weapon and wrested it from Pennington's hand, even before the self-acting hammer could raise to fall on the cartridge.

"A little less reckless, if you please, my dear fellow, or some one might get hurt," he said, sharply, turning the muzzle as if by accident toward Frank Lisle, who seemed on the point of interfering in behalf of his friend.

"I repeat my words: if you bet, Mr. Pennington, you will lose. This is my last warning."

Pennington looked at Lisle, his eyes asking a mute question, which was answered in the same fashion. The cards had not been touched during this brief disturbance.

"Win or lose, I never take back a bet once placed. Cover my money, or change your name to Crawfish Squaler."

"Since he will have it, 'git thar, Eli!" said Monte Jim, with a short nod to Blinky, dropping the pistol and turning away to his former seat, as though the affair possessed no further interest for him.

With deft fingers, Scott counted out a sum equal to that lying on his overcoat, handing all to the brakeman, who reluctantly took it as stakeholder, sulkily muttering to Pennington:

"You can't win, an' you're bound to lose, an' durned ef I ever thought you'd be sech a pesky fool, after all I said!"

But Pennington heard him not, his eyes following the swiftly flying hands of the dealer until the three cards lay backs uppermost, when he caught at the notched card and turned it over—to stare aghast at the ace of hearts!

CHAPTER III.

CURLY KAINE, KING OF BISMARCK.

A LOUD snort of mingled distrust and anger broke from the nostrils of the brakeman as he dropped the roll of money on the folded overcoat resting on Blinky Scott's knees.

"Foul play!" cried Alva Pennington, dropping the fatal card and making a swift snatch at the money—only to clutch the cold muzzle of a revolver instead.

"Easy, pard! Business is business, an' I reckon I hold the ace in this little game!" grinned Blinky Scott.

Pennington withdrew his hand as swiftly as though it had unexpectedly come in contact with the clammy skin of a venomous serpent, and his flushed countenance turned a shade

paler as he saw the pointed hammer begin to raise beneath the firm pressure of the gambler's finger.

"It's all a vile trick!" he snarled, his voice scarcely recognizable as he perceptibly shrunk away from the threatening muzzle.

"That's so!" echoed Frank Lisle. "It's an infernal swindle from first to last."

"But it won't work! I'll have my money back, or know the reason why! If it was lost at a fair game, I wouldn't care; but this is a skin snap all through!"

"On what grounds do you base your charge of foul play, Mr. Pennington?" quietly asked Monte Jim. "Because you lost? Didn't you have ample warning that you couldn't win—that you would be skinned most thoroughly if you insisted upon bucking against the papers?"

"I don't care a curse *what* you said!" snarled the young man, now fairly beside himself with rage. "I ain't going to be gouged out of my money while my head's hot! That slippery scoundrel rung in a cold hand on me, while you were chinning to give him an opportunity to play the trick. I know it! It was the queen of hearts that was marked by a little notch in the upper corner, like that, and—"

As he spoke, the angry youth caught up one of the cards to illustrate, but as his eyes turned upon its face, his voice choked, his jaw dropped, his eyes filling with a stupid bewilderment too great for expression; for there was the queen of hearts, and there in the upper corner, was the tell-tale mark by means of which he had confidently expected to make a rich addition to his little fortune at a single stroke.

Monte Jim deftly caught the card as it fell from his unnerved fingers, a quiet smile curling his mustache.

"The queen is marked, sure enough! Most likely an imperfection in the trimming-knife—see!" and lifting the other cards, he held them so that all could see they were marked in precisely the same place, and after the same fashion.

"But only the queen was marked at first! I can swear to that, and so can you, Frank!" turning to Lisle, who nodded assent, though his handsome face flushed slightly before the quizzical gaze of the dashing sport.

"In other words, Mr. Pennington, you thought you were betting your money on a sure thing. You saw the marked card, and felt sure you couldn't possibly lose. Was that fair? If all things had turned out as you confidently expected, would you have listened to our complaints of foul play? Not a bit of it! You'd have claimed that money talks and all bets go. You thought to skin us, and you got skinned instead. I warned you more than once that you couldn't win at our own game. I fairly begged of you to take your money and keep it in your own pocket. But you wouldn't have it so. You hungered for our pile, and insisted on a deal.

"Well, you've got it. Blinky threw the papers for you, and you picked out the card you felt sure would win, by the mark which you fancied your eyes alone had detected. You lost, just as I warned you you would. And now you're kicking—a fact which I also predicted. You—the thoroughbred!"

"I'm not going to be gouged out of my money!"

"It is not your money any longer. You forced us to win it, and an army like you could not take it back against our will. If you insist on a row, you can be accommodated at any time; but you'll never invite another."

Frank Lisle tightened his grasp on his half-crazed mate, for a single glance showed him how little chance they would stand of holding their own if matters should come to a fight. One and all of the party were ready to obey the slightest signal of their chief, and the odds were far too great.

"Don't be a fool, Al!" he growled, harshly. "We can't fight them. Your money is gone, and you'll only throw your life after it if you make a break now."

"True as gospel writ, Mr. Pennington," echoed Monte Jim, with that annoying smile again lighting up his handsome face. "Your wealth has gone where the woodbine twineth, but possibly it may prove a less serious loss than you now imagine."

"My present headquarters are at Bismarck. Your destination is the same, I believe. When your brain has cooled off a little, call on me there, and I may put you in the way of making your loss good. I say this as a friend."

Despite himself, Pennington was impressed by these words, or rather the manner in which they were uttered. He had time, too, to realize something of his folly in acting as he had.

The money was lost. His sure thing had failed him. Instead of skinning the gamblers, he had himself been fleeced by the marvelous sleight-of-hand displayed by Blinky Scott, who had substituted two marked cards for the others, beneath their very eyes. He knew, too, that all honest men could give but one verdict: served him right!

All the same, he mentally swore to be avenged on the dashing sport and his tools, as he allowed

Frank Lisle to draw him away to their former seat; but before he could form any decisive plan of action, the train paused at a station, and the gang of three-card-monte players hastily left the coach.

Frank Lisle attempted to utter some words of consolation, but with a surly growl, Pennington jerked away from him, and, leaving his seat, made his way unsteadily along the aisle toward the rear door of the coach.

Frank Lisle made a movement as though about to follow him, but the scowling glance which Alva Pennington cast over his shoulder as he gained the door changed this impulse, and with a shrug of his broad shoulders, he sunk back into his seat and lighted a fresh cigar.

Slamming the door behind him, Alva Pennington stood on the platform, staring moodily out into the darkness as the train thundered swiftly along, for a moment actually meditating a headlong plunge into eternity. With his money vanished his dearest hopes in life, as he then believed, and life seemed hardly worth the living.

Not for long, however. He was hardly rash enough to take his own life, bleak and barren though that now appeared to him. And, strangely enough, the words spoken by Monte Jim were again ringing in his ears. It was a wild, visionary hope. How could Monte Jim put him in the way of making his loss good? And even if he could, would he do so?

"I'll hunt him out and see," he muttered, turning his eyes from the darkness to the light which streamed through the door of the coach beyond. "If he's only playing with me, it will be a dear jest to him!"

A vivid light shot into his eyes, but it was not born of his recent thoughts. Something within the coach was responsible for the sudden alteration.

Near the center of the coach a young lady was seated, pressing close against the wall, shrinking from a man who occupied a portion of the seat with her. A look of annoyance, almost of terror, rested upon her pale face, and Alva Pennington waited for no more, but opening the door, he strode hurriedly along the aisle, to be greeted with a little cry of joy from the pale lips of the young woman.

She was rarely beautiful, now that the color flashed back into her face. Her features were almost perfection in their clear-cut outlines. Her hair was dark, almost black. Her eyes, large and lustrous as those of a fawn, glowing jetty black in her agitation. Her arched lips showed crimson again, revealing twin rows of pearly teeth as they parted to address the young man who had hastened to her rescue.

Her garb was rich, but plain, admirably suited to the weary journey she was taking, fitting her tall, graceful figure with a perfection that borrowed a portion of beauty from the charms it revealed, while concealing.

"Alva—cousin—I'm so glad you have returned!" she exclaimed, her voice rich and musical, despite its trembling. "I have been so annoyed—this person—please ask him to remove to some other seat!"

At the eager light which so suddenly filled her eyes and brightened her countenance—at her appealing motion as Alva Pennington entered the car—the man who shared her seat glanced swiftly up and took in the situation; but his only evidence of this lay in the manner in which he straightened up his athletic frame, leaning back against the cushioned seat and thrusting his white, shapely hands into his pockets as his magnetic eyes fastened themselves upon the face of the new-comer. And a smile, half-derisive, wholly insulting, curled his mustached lips as he encountered the angry scowl which accompanied the sharply-uttered speech:

"You hear what the lady says? Take yourself off! You have no right to intrude where you're not wanted."

"Who says so?" coolly demanded the fellow. "I do! Get out of that seat, or I'll put you out!"

"Well, now, you needn't rush a man like that," drawled the intruder, impudently staring up into the angry face of his adversary. "Give a man time to get into motion, won't you?"

Pennington bit his lip sharply, for he began to suspect that he was being laughed at, and he took a swift measure of his man before proceeding to extremities.

There was scant comfort in this for one who was a good judge of human nature. Almost a giant in size, this man was "built from the ground up," to use the expressive vernacular, and even in his present angry confusion of mind, Pennington was wise enough to see that he would have his hands full, in case the fellow chose to show fight.

But he, himself, was no physical coward, and with that particular lady looking on, he could not retreat, even had he felt the inclination. Sharply he spoke again:

"Well, don't be all night about it. Your presence annoys the lady. She asks me to remove you, and I'll do it if I have to break your neck in the attempt! Get out out of that, will you?"

"I reckon you don't know who I am, stranger," drawled the rascal, grinning. "Ask them," with a nod toward the other occupants of the coach. "Ask them who Curly Kaine, the King of Bismarck, is?"

Alva Pennington made a swift grasp at the fellow's throat, only to have his arm knocked aside so violently that it turned him half around; and when he wheeled to renew the attack, it was to find himself staring fairly into the broad muzzle of a heavy-calibered derringer.

"Simmer down, little cuss, and you'll live all the longer for it!" sneered the fellow, as the young man involuntarily shrunk from before the deadly weapon. "I don't reckon you want this seat quite as bad as you thought you did!"

CHAPTER IV.

MONTA JIM TRUMPS THE KING.

ALVA PENNINGTON was by no means a physical coward, but he was a "tender foot," and new to the rough and ready ways and means so familiar with the Occidental toughs into whose domains he seemed to be abruptly cast. Bred in a clime where the ban of the law rests on those who carry brutal weapons, he was not yet accustomed to this uncomfortably prompt habit of displaying pistols where he only thought of using his fists; but he was rapidly learning the lesson of "the drop," and though he shrunk back from the heavy-calibered piece of pocket artillery, his own hand mechanically moved toward the secret spot where his revolver rested.

Curly Kaine was better versed, however, for an ugly light filled his magnetic black eyes, and his drooping mustaches curled fiercely as he grated:

"Hands up and fingers empty, my dear fellow! I've got you lined, and you're my meat, if you try to pull a gun!"

It was not easy to mistake these words, and Pennington hesitated, almost suffocating with rage as he saw the gaze of his cousin resting upon him. For many reasons he desired her good will, to stand high in her estimation, to have her regard him as a hero ready to do and dare for her sake, against any and all odds; and to be held impotent by one man, after this fashion, was bitter indeed.

"Drop that pistol, and I can sweep the car with your big carcass!" he grated, half crouching as though about to dare a shot and leap upon the insolent sport bare-handed.

"That's your talk. Stick to the notion, if it gives you any satisfaction. As for me, I never bother my head with little boys, unless they get too much in my way; then I brush them aside. If they show too much impudence—like you, for instance, in interrupting a very agreeable chat between this young lady and myself—I just take them across my lap and give them the measure of my hand, right where they can't see the impress without the aid of a looking-glass."

Thoroughly enraged, Alva Pennington struck out swiftly, thinking to knock up the hand that held the pistol and close with the sport before a shot could be fired; but once more he was foiled by the lightning activity and great strength of the man who claimed to be the King of Bismarck.

A sinewy hand gripped his throat, shook him for a moment as a child might shake its doll, then cast him heavily across the aisle into a vacant seat. Before he could arise to renew his desperate attempt, Alva Pennington was covered by the derringer, and Curly Kaine cried sharply:

"Simmer down and drop your nonsense, little cuss! Keep the seat I give you, and thank your lucky stars that I am in a jolly good humor this evening, or you'd be half-way over the range by this time."

"I'll have your heart's blood for this!" grated Pennington, now fairly beside himself, seeing nothing, caring nothing for the deadly weapon which bore full upon his brain—with thoughts only for the woman he loved, in whose eyes he was being so shamefully humiliated by this insolent giant.

"You make another move, and I'll scatter your brains all over the coach!" sternly cried Curly Kaine, his black eyes filling with an evil light, his cheek turning white, not with fear, but as the signal of danger to all who barred his way.

The next moment would almost surely have proven the last on earth for Alva Pennington, had not a strong hand shot over the sport's shoulder and closed around the level weapon, turning its muzzle upward as the trigger came back and the hammer fell. The lead tore its way through the roof of the car, and with a hissing curse, Curly Kaine dropped the now useless weapon and turned upon the man who had dared to snatch his victim from beneath his talons.

What was it he beheld that sent such a different shade of white into his face?

A man, erect and smiling, with one hand partially extended toward him, the fingers of which almost entirely concealed from view a short derringer. Only this, and Curly Kaine

had won the reputation of carrying "sand" enough to face a dozen armed men without "wilting." Fairly won it, too, but they were not men like the one who now held him covered.

"You're a little too careless with your barkers, Curly," uttered a smooth, mellow voice, as the blue eyes gazed fixedly into the blazing black orbs of the sport. "First you know, you'll hurt somebody, and thus ruin your reputation as a perfectly harmless lady's pet."

A savage snarl escaped the lips of the sport, and the hot flush that crossed his cheeks told how keenly those mocking words stung him. For a moment it seemed as though he would risk a shot from the pistol which covered him, and leap upon this bold speaker; but even he found the odds too great.

"What right have you to interfere, Monte Jim?" he growled, in suffocating rage.

"The right of any man to protect a lady who is suffering from the insolence of a contemptible scoundrel!" was the swift retort, the musical voice growing hard and stern, while the blue eyes gleamed like orbs of polished steel. "I say nothing of this gentleman, for every man is supposed to be able to take care of himself; but you have annoyed this lady by thrusting your company upon her against her wishes. No one with a spark of manhood in his composition would be guilty of such an act. Your evil reputation as a bully and fire-eater prevented these persons," with a contemptuous inclination of his head toward the other passengers, "from interfering in her behalf, but that has no influence over me, as you know."

"Curly Kaine, get out of that seat and apologize to the lady for your disgraceful conduct!" cried Monte Jim.

Choking with rage, the fellow snarled:

"I'll be cursed if I do!"

"Don't be quite so positive, my dear fellow, for I hate to force a man to break an oath. You've got to get out and eat humble-pie, or Madame Brimstone will be under the sad necessity of donning mourning and advertising for a new husband to run the Clipper Shades. Will you knuckle?"

"Give me half a show—"

"You shall have a whole circus in just one minute, Curly, unless you vacate these premises. If you remain obstinate at the end of that period, sure as the Lord made little apples, I'll pitch you head-first out of yonder window."

Soft and mellow though the tones in which this threat was uttered, there was a glittering menace in those blue eyes which told the sport not a word was spoken idly, and Monte Jim drew forth a watch with his free hand, touching the spring and marking the position of the second-hand.

Curly Kaine stiffened his muscles for a leap on his cool adversary, but that eagle gaze was upon him, and he knew that such an action would be worse than folly—suicide.

He wished to yield, but did not know how to do so gracefully, or without forever staining his dearly loved reputation as a "bad man." As a consequence, the time of grace expired before he made any move to comply with the hard demand.

With lightning swiftness both watch and pistol vanished, and then those gloved hands closed upon his throat, barely allowing him time to hastily gasp:

"Let up, you devil! I cave!"

Monte Jim instantly relaxed his grip, with a low laugh.

"Good enough! I had an idea you would listen to reason in the course of time. Come out of the wilderness, Johnny!"

Showing his teeth in a sickly smile, Curly Kaine arose and moved out into the aisle, his glittering eyes on the watch for an opening by means of which he might turn the tables on his adversary. But Monte Jim knew him thoroughly, and careless as he seemed, kept warily on guard.

"Take off your hat, my dear boy," and with a swift sweep of the hand Monte Jim knocked the glossy silk tile from the curling locks of its owner. "Put your best foot foremost, and tell this lady how sorry you are for troubling her; that you will never again be guilty of such ungentlemanly conduct, if you have to swear off drinking from now henceforth."

It was a bitter pill for the self-styled King of Bismarck to swallow, but he saw that Monte Jim held his derringer cocked and ready for use, and he dare not rebel. Sulkily he muttered a few words, his eyes downcast, his face as pale as that of a corpse.

"You need a lesson or two in elocution, but I'll let that pass this time," said Monte Jim, mockingly. "And now, my dear fellow, I have an impression that your presence is required in the smoker. Need I say more?"

"You've said enough, Jim Ince," with a hard, strained tone and an evil glance from beneath his long lashes. "Too much, maybe. I won't forget it in a hurry."

"You might find a more agreeable subject to ruminate upon, methinks; but every man to his own notion. Yonder is your hat, and there's the straight trail to the smoker. If you feel aggrieved by anything I have said or done, you

know where I hang out. I'm always at home to men who call on business matters."

Without a word in answer, Curly Kaine picked up his hat and strode along the aisle, opening the door with one hand as he swiftly wheeled around, pistol in the other—only to confront the handsome gambler, whose laughing blue eyes were glancing along the leveled barrel of a revolver, and whose mocking voice sounded the query:

"Have you forgotten anything, my dear fellow?"

Curly Kaine was not all fool, and knowing that Monte Jim held him wholly at his mercy, he turned again and passed out of the coach without trying to use his pistol.

One moment of keen watching, until he saw the door of the smoking-car open and Curly Kaine enter, then Monte Jim turned to the lady, doffing his hat and bowing respectfully, no longer the dashing, reckless sport, but a gentleman.

CHAPTER V.

MONTA JIM'S GIFT.

His voice was soft and smooth as silk as he addressed the young lady:

"I beg your pardon for this disagreeable scene, madam, but I saw that you were being sadly annoyed by that fellow, and believed a little rough talk would give you less discomfort than to see a man killed. And that was the only alternative, with a desperado like Curly Kaine."

"I thank you—you were very kind," faltered the young lady, whose nerves had evidently suffered severely.

"Not in the least," with a graceful bow. "I only performed the duty which devolves upon all gentlemen where a lady is in distress. I knew the fellow—a bully who is all the more dangerous from having been born and partly raised in good society. He has won a reputation for reckless disregard of danger, and makes it his boast that he owns a private graveyard. There was only the one method of disposing of him without coming to actual blows."

"I am afraid you will suffer for your gallantry," timidly ventured the young woman, with a shy glance up at the handsome countenance of the sport. "He threatened you—"

"Barking dogs seldom bite, and threatened men live long," laughed Monte Jim, lightly. "I know Curly Kaine, the King of Bismarck, as he calls himself, and I reckon he knows me. He'll be only too glad to let the affair blow over, as stirring it up would hardly redound to his credit, even among his peculiar associates. With them, a man is wiser to die than to show the slightest trace of the white feather."

During all this, Alva Pennington had remained silent, now that the crisis was over, feeling faint from the force with which he had been flung against the oaken arm of the seat. But as he noted that shy glance—as he could not avoid detecting the wondering interest with which the young lady regarded this handsome champion who had so suddenly made his appearance on the scene—his face flushed and a bitter jealousy kindled in his heart.

Yet he managed to stifle this sufficiently to speak, as he arose and came forward, his right hand partly extended:

"I suppose I ought to thank you, too, though I reckon I hardly needed your help. The rascal took me by surprise, but I could have matched him easily enough."

"No doubt of that, my dear sir, and consequently no thanks are due me," returned Monte Jim, with a winning smile, as he accepted the hand so gingerly proffered.

"I chanced to witness the entire affair, from the rear end of the coach, and can cheerfully bear testimony that you acted the part of a man, from beginning to end. Your only mistake was in treating Curly Kaine as a gentleman, instead of the rough he is. You are from the East, I believe?"

Pennington nodded, eying Monte Jim suspiciously, failing to comprehend the drift of this query, and otherwise puzzled by the manner of the gambler. Not a sign of their having ever met before was visible in word or action, tone or glance.

"Shall I tell you where the ear-marks of what we border ruffians call a tenderfoot showed so plainly?" he added, with a pleasant laugh. "In your permitting Curly Kaine to catch the drop so easily. When you are fairly acclimated, you will do as we do—get the drop before speaking or showing your hand. It's a great deal more healthy than your manlier way. In Rome, you know—"

His low laugh abruptly ceased, and bending forward, he gazed keenly into Pennington's face, then hastily uttered:

"Pardon me, but is not your name Pennington?"

"Yes," replied the astonished young man, drawing back.

"Then you are the gentleman who met with a serious loss a short time ago, in the smoking-car? I thought I recognized your countenance, but was not quite certain."

White as a sheet, his eyes glowing, Pennington winked violently, with a warning nod toward the young lady; but Monte Jim appa-

rently failed to comprehend his meaning, and added:

"Of course, my dear fellow! You are loth to let this lady know you were so—"

"Silence, curse it!" snarled Pennington, angrily, making a swift stroke at the speaker with his tightly-clinched fist, only to have it brushed lightly aside, seemingly without an effort on the part of the smiling sport. "Can't you take a hint?"

At this fierce outburst, the big blue eyes of the handsome sport opened still wider, and there was an expression of innocent wonder upon his countenance, while the young lady seemed both shocked and mortified by the rudeness of her traveling companion.

"Alva—Mr. Pennington—you forget yourself!" she hurriedly exclaimed, then turning a half appealing glance toward the man who she felt had been causelessly insulted.

"There is no harm done," easily uttered Monte Jim, in answer to the mute appeal. "I can readily understand why Mr. Pennington is reluctant to have the subject discussed—"

"Why don't you show your understanding, then?" sharply broke in the young man. "Who gave you the right to interfere with my private affairs after this fashion?"

Softer and more silken grew the voice of the sport.

"If I have offended, I most humbly beg your pardon, though, I assure you, it was wholly unintentional on my part. As I said before, I can comprehend why you should be reluctant to have this lady learn of your misfortune, though you are not the first man by many whose pocket has been picked—"

"You're right; it was picked by a pack of professional thieves!" snapped Pennington, his eyes aglow.

Monte Jim bowed, with a bland smile.

"Thanks; I felt sure you must be the gentleman who met with the misfortune."

The young lady was glancing quickly from one to the other of the two men, unable to fathom the exact meaning of this interchange of words, so sharp on one side, so smooth and courteous on the other, but with a woman's quick intuition feeling that something was wrong; and in hopes of effecting a diversion, she hurriedly addressed Pennington:

"Your pocket picked, Alva? How was it? You did not lose very much, I hope?"

"Not so much but what I'll come out even with the game in the end," muttered Pennington, with a sullen side glance at the face of the smiling sport.

If this was intended for a threat, it apparently troubled Monte Jim but little, for he continued:

"As I was saying, Mr. Pennington, it may appear like a liberty in a stranger, this broaching an affair which you seem to wish to keep dark, but I trust the sequel will win me a full pardon."

"As it happened, I was an eye-witness to the whole affair through which you were robbed of your money, and while you were working the wrong trail, I had the good fortune to catch and persuade the robber to restore his booty. This is your property, I believe. Pray glance over it, and see if the amount is correct."

While speaking, Monte Jim produced a compact roll of bank-notes from an inner pocket, and, with a low bow, held them out toward the thoroughly astounded man. Mechanically he accepted them, glancing confusedly from the money to the face of the man who so curiously restored his winnings, unable to comprehend what it all meant.

The young lady uttered a little exclamation as she saw the roll of money.

"Oh, Alva—so much as that? And only for this gentleman you would have lost it forever! You, as well as I, owe him many thanks. Pray tell him so, and then enlighten me. How did it happen? Who robbed you? And why were you so anxious to keep all knowledge of your loss from me?"

Almost feverishly she spoke. Her keen wits told her that all was not yet made clear—that there was something mysterious underlying this affair, which her feminine curiosity was bound to solve. But that was not her only incentive.

Even apart from the timely service he had rendered her in forcing Curly Kaine to beat a retreat, covered with confusion, she felt a strange interest in this handsome stranger who was so bold, and yet so gentle, so courteous, so winning in both manner and speech. She longed to learn more of him; and a warm flush suffused her countenance as she encountered his respectful gaze, for just at that instant it flashed across her mind that the love of a man like this must be richly worth the winning, and she feared he might have the power to divine her inmost thoughts.

In her confusion she turned to Alva Pennington, who still stood like one in a dream, gazing upon the money which he had never expected to behold again.

"Have you lost all power of speech, Alva? I fear Mr.—"

"Blessed if I know what to say!" blurted out the astounded young man, but awkwardly ex-

tending his unoccupied hand toward the sport, who gracefully accented it with a warm pressure. "I never expected to see the money again—though I swore to get even with the man that took it!" and there was a half-defiant glow in his eyes as he looked into the face of Monte Jim.

With a quiet laugh, the gambler slipped into the seat as the young lady moved her drapery with that graceful art which her sex can display in giving a mute invitation.

"Left to yourself, Mr. Pennington, you would never have recovered a dollar of your loss, because you went the wrong way to work. I'm afraid you underrated the men you were pitting yourself against. But, pardon me," he said, leaning forward and placing one gloved hand on Pennington's arm, as the latter was about to slip the roll of bills into his pocket. "You have not counted your money to see if the amount is correct. Pray oblige me."

Pennington muttered something about not doubting it was all right, only to be quietly cut short by the sport:

"Allow me to insist, my dear sir. I pledged my word to the fellow who took your money that no further question concerning it should ever arise to trouble him. If the whole sum is not there, then my pledge to him is void, and I'll have to hunt him up again. You comprehend?"

If he did not, Alva Pennington complied, all the same, hurriedly running over the bills, then muttering that all was correct and the entire amount restored.

"And now, tell me how it happened," asked the young lady. "Was your pocket picked, Alva? And how did you manage to recover the money so soon?" turning to Monte Jim.

"Mr. Pennington lost his money, that much is certain," responded Monte Jim, with a slight smile, as the other flushed hotly at the query. "By good fortune I happened to see how it was done, and when the gang left the train, I followed them with the intention of forcing them to make restitution of their booty. As it happened, the rascals knew who I was, and when I put it plainly to them, rather than have any more words they disgorged, on the understanding that nothing more should be said or done about the matter, when once the money reached the hands of its rightful owner."

"But isn't that what they call compounding a felony?"

Monte Jim shrugged his broad shoulders, glancing quizzically toward Pennington as he made reply:

"It was the best I could do under the circumstances. You must remember that you are among the heathen now, and not expect a perfect observance of either law or etiquette on the part of the natives. We sadly need the services of a few missionaries from a more enlightened region."

"Well," echoed the young lady, with a shy glance up at the handsome face of the sport. "You surely do not class yourself among the heathen, Mr.—"

"Ince—James Ince is my name," with a low bow.

"And mine is Medea Pennington—since Alva is too stupid to take the hint and save a self-introduction," laughed the young lady, with a half-impatient glance toward her sulky traveling companion.

"Where's the use?" he muttered, scowling at the suave sport. "It's not likely we'll ever meet each other again."

"Your wife, I presume?" coolly asked Monte Jim.

"My cousin."

"Pardon. The name being the same, made my mistake very natural. As for our not meeting again, if your destination is Bismarck, such an event is quite on the cards, since that is my present headquarters, and the city is not so large, as yet, that one so charming as Miss Pennington can long be lost to sight. I, for one, would deeply regret its being otherwise."

Alva Pennington twisted uneasily on his seat and scowled again at this speech, but Medea did not appear greatly annoyed by it. Pointed though the words were, they came in a tone so respectful, so gentle and deprecatory, that she could not take offense, though her fair cheeks grew a shade more flushed, and her lustrous eyes sunk upon her lap.

Only for a moment. Then they met those magnetic blue orbs frankly, and perhaps her speech was more emphatic than it would have been but for the boorishness—as she considered it, being in ignorance of what he really knew concerning this audacious stranger—of her cousin.

"Not more than I—than we should, Mr. Ince. You have been of great service to us both, and we are deeply in your debt. I have no means of knowing how long our stay in Bismarck will be, but while we remain, no visitor will be more welcome than yourself."

"You are very kind, Miss Pennington," and the voice of the reckless sport grew strangely soft and musical as he uttered the simple words. "You have repaid my poor services a thousand-fold already."

CHAPTER VI.

DISSOLVING THE SPELL.

THERE followed a brief silence. Neither of the trio appeared eager to break it, though very different emotions actuated them. Least agreeable were those experienced by Alva Pennington, to whom this interchange of friendly sentiments had proven more bitter than worm-wood.

Madly in love with his cousin, he regarded with suspicion all of his sex who came in close contact with her, and now he fancied she was falling in love with Monte Jim. Certainly, never before this had she displayed so much interest in any man, much less a perfect stranger. And yet he dared not show the gambler up in his real character, just then.

"You are well acquainted in Bismarck?" asked Medea.

"Yes, I think I may say so. Of course, being the end of the road, there is a constantly shifting population, here to-day and gone to-morrow. Have you friends or relatives in Bismarck whom you are seeking?"

Medea Pennington cast a quick glance into his face, while her cousin also perceptibly started; but the handsome countenance was immobile as that of a sphinx.

Alva touched his cousin's foot with his own, flashing a warning glance toward her, which checked the query that was almost uttered. With a low laugh, Monte Jim bowed.

"Pardon me, Miss Pennington. Remember I told you I belonged to the heathen class. About Bismarck: you'll find much that is curious and interesting there, if you've never lived in a lively, wide-awake, 'end-of-the-road town.' Uncivilized and full of rough, reckless characters, as a matter of course. As a rule, a lady may promenade it from one end to the other, and be safer than in an Eastern city; but where so many drunken toughs are congregated, you will do better not to venture forth without an escort."

"For instance—though that happened in another town, and at the end of another road—a friend of mine, whose name, by the way, was the same as yours—"

With a low, eager exclamation Medea bent forward, asking:

"His whole name—was it Lloyd Pennington?"

"It may have been, though I would not like to say positively," replied Monte Jim, apparently failing to notice her poorly suppressed excitement. "When I knew him he was known as Poker Pennington, from his peculiar skill at that game. In short, not to put too fine a point upon it, Penn was an inveterate gambler, and a pretty tough case."

"Yet you called him your friend?"

"And so he was—the warmest friend I ever knew, since my mother died. A gambler, a bird of prey, a man whose hands were not always clear of human blood, always ready for a frolic or a fight—Poker Penn was my friend; I'll never deny that claim, though you look so astonished Miss Pennington. If fate wills that our life trails are to often cross, you will some day learn that I am by no means an angel of light—"

"Well, hardly, Monte Jim!" uttered a clear, stern voice, as a heavy hand dropped on the gambler's shoulder from behind. "You're out of your range here, my man!"

Monte Jim turned swiftly, to behold the conductor, whose entrance had not been noticed in the interest of the conversation. Sternly that fiery gaze was met, and slowly the hand of the sport dropped away from the pistol it had mechanically sought at the unexpected touch and salutation.

"Miss Pennington, has this fellow dared to annoy you in any manner?" the conductor added, touching his cap with a bow.

In amazement the young lady gazed at the conductor.

"Surely there is some mistake, Mr. Rice!"

With a short, hard laugh, Monte Jim rose from the seat and stepped into the aisle, his eyes glittering as he said:

"Not at all, Miss Pennington. I am Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck. All is said when I acknowledge that title. If you are curious to learn more, ask Mr. Rice for my record. He can give it to you straight as a string if he sees fit."

"As for you, Will Rice, I'll see you later!" and then, with a low and sweeping bow, Monte Jim turned on his heel and walked swiftly along the aisle to the door, opening it and passing through to the smoker without a single backward glance.

Medea Pennington gazed after him with a troubled light in her large eyes, scarce able to believe the evidence of her own senses. His cold, yet bitter, tones still rung in her ears as the door closed and his proud, erect figure vanished from sight; yet she could not bring herself to take those harsh words for truth.

Surely there must be some cruel mistake lying beneath all this! And with a sensation of growing anger, she turned toward the conductor, whose appearance had so abruptly put the handsome stranger to flight.

But the sharp words which rose to her lips died away as she beheld that honest countenance,

glowing with the consciousness of one who has performed his duty, mingling, possibly, with a bit of personal gratification at having so thoroughly routed one who had proven himself a powerful enemy.

"Your pardon, Miss Pennington," said the official, as he placed his lantern in the aisle, then slipped into the seat beside her, "for making a scene, but really I could not help it, when I saw the matchless impudence of that crafty scoundrel. He knows he has no business here—"

"Why not?" a little sharply asked Medea, tiny lines gathering upon her fair brow. "His manners and address were those of a gentleman. You insulted him shamefully, and that in the presence of those whom he had recently rendered a great service. I wonder that he allowed it to pass without calling you to account for your speech!"

This was rather more than he had bargained for, and Will Rice flushed hotly as he drew back a little from before those flashing orbs, while a cold hand seemed to be tightening its grip around his heart. But not for long did he flinch. He felt that he had not exceeded his duty, and it would not require many words to prove this fact.

"Monte Jim would hardly recognize himself under the title you give him, Miss Pennington," he laughed, shortly.

"What do you mean by that name? He called himself James Ince," petulantly interjected Medea.

"Possibly that is his rightful name, though he makes use of so many that I doubt whether he himself could swear to it. Unluckily for him, there is not the slightest possible room for doubt concerning his character. Monte Jim is the most dangerous confidence-man in all this region, and he is at the head of a numerous gang but little better than himself. He lives by robbing those who are less cunning than himself, and if you knew as much concerning him as I know, you would rather take a rattlesnake to your bosom than permit that crafty demon to approach you within arm's length!"

Medea Pennington stared at him, with a perplexed air, despite herself feeling convinced by his earnestness that he was speaking from personal knowledge.

"To convince you, I need only mention a single incident which occurred not an hour ago, on this very train," said the official, only to be bluntly cut short by Alva Pennington.

"What's the use? What do we care whether the fellow is a demon or an angel in disguise? He's gone, and that settles it. What interests me most is getting to Bismarck. How much longer will it take?"

"Less than an hour. But, pardon me, Mr. Pennington; I must differ from you as to the importance of this affair. I have accused a man of being a rascal, whom Miss Pennington apparently thinks just the contrary, and in self-defense I must prove my words true."

"Did I say so?" murmured Medea, slightly confused.

"With your eyes," bowed Rice. "I found him conversing with you, as though he might be your equal; and not an hour ago he robbed a gentleman of five thousand dollars, in—"

He paused abruptly, without finishing the sentence, his honest brown eyes roving quickly from face to face, for a muttered curse came from the lips of Alva Pennington, just as a triumphant smile curved those of his fair cousin.

"You are surely wrong, Mr. Rice!" she exclaimed, with a gleeful little laugh, as she clapped her gloved hands together, while her eyes sparkled vividly. "It was my cousin who lost that money by having his pocket picked, and Mr. Ince brought it back to him, having frightened the pickpocket into giving it up. Am I not right, Alva?" turning to her cousin.

"Of course you're right," sulkily muttered the young man, who knew that the whole truth must surely come out now. "And that man, Monte Jim or Jim Ince, whatever his name may happen to be, is more of a gentleman than some of those who wait until he is out of hearing before they try to backbite him. I, for one, don't care to listen to it any longer!"

Jumping up, he left the coach with an angry scowl at the astonished conductor.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONDUCTOR'S REVELATION.

AT the very beginning of his run, Will Rice had been of important service—had saved Medea Pennington from falling beneath the wheels of the train, as she attempted to follow her cousin from one coach to another—and whenever his duties would permit, he had sought the company of the young lady whose appearance had so deeply impressed his fancy, pointing out to her the various objects of interest along the way, and greatly lightening the tedium of her journey. Bright, intelligent, a gentleman of birth and breeding, manly and good-looking if not handsome, Will Rice soon made an impression almost as deep as that which he had received, thereby awakening the jealousy and dislike of Alva Pennington, who was something of a dog in the manger, where his fair cousin was concerned.

Rice was sharp-sighted enough to see this, and consequently he felt little compunction about clearing himself of one whom he already considered his rival.

"Miss Pennington, I trust you will believe me, when I say that, had I suspected the real facts of the case, I would not have mentioned this affair, but, since your cousin has spoken so plainly, I must tell the truth, or myself rest under the imputation of having told you a falsehood. Nay," he added, impetuously, as the lady was about to speak, "hear me out, please."

"This Monte Jim is so called because he is the chief of a gang of three-card monte players. It is a game that seems to possess peculiar attractions for those who never saw it worked before, and with such an adroit rascal at the head, it is not strange that your cousin was led to betting heavily on the game, though he had not a chance to win. He did bet, and the gang under Monte Jim won five thousand dollars from him."

"But—they both said a pickpocket took it—and he brought it back to cousin," faltered Medea, puzzled.

"Monte Jim was the pickpocket, then," with a short laugh. "And if he restored the money, you may be sure he has bigger game in view. Heaven grant his evil schemes may not include you, Miss Pennington!" he fervently added.

Despite the powerful attraction which she had felt for the dashing sport, Medea could no longer doubt the truth, and a cold chill crept over her frame as she began to feel that she had narrowly escaped some terrible peril—just what, would have sorely puzzled her to say.

"But why did he—my cousin—try to deceive me?"

"Doubtless because he wished to keep you from suspecting the fact of his having lost his money at a gambling game."

"Why do you permit such men to ply their vile vocation among your passengers? Why suffer them on the train at all?"

A short, bitter laugh parted the lips of the conductor.

"Why? Because I can't help it! Miss Pennington, I am as helpless as a child in arms. I have been a faithful servant to the men who own this road, almost from the day the first spike was driven. I have performed my duty in every respect, as long as I was permitted. And yet, this is my last run over the road, unless I am sadly mistaken. Shall I tell you why?"

Medea nodded, strongly impressed by his earnest speech.

"Because Monte Jim, as he calls himself, owns the men who own this road! That sounds harsh, considering the nature and calling of the fellow, but for all that, I speak within bounds."

"For some reason, possibly because he knew I was powerfully opposed to men of his caliber—Monte Jim rarely tried his tricks along my run, though he made up for this on the other trains. Once or twice I caught his gang at work, and each time I forced them to cease operations. By that course, I got them down on me, and I felt it at headquarters."

"Still, I never dreamed that his influence was so great, until this week. I caught them skinning a stupid German who had an abundance of money, and forced the gang to disgorge their plunder. Some of them offered to show fight, but my train-men stood by me, and Monte Jim bade them submit."

"I reported the affair at headquarters, and though I have not heard direct from there, I know that on this very train there is carried an order discharging me, to be delivered when we reach the end of the run. Monte Jim also sent to headquarters, and to his influence I owe my discharge."

"For simply performing your duty?"

"You can judge for yourself. And thus judging, can you longer wonder that I was indignant when I caught that rascal seated beside you, so soon after one of my men told me of his robbing a passenger of a large sum of money?"

"No; you were perfectly right, and I thank you sincerely. Yet—he appeared a perfect gentleman."

"They say a rattlesnake becomes a vision of beauty when once it has its victim fascinated; but that does not lessen its poisonous nature. Of the two, I believe the serpent is the less to be feared."

"You heard the words he spoke as he left here? Do you wish to learn more of Monte Jim?"

Medea Pennington hesitated for a brief space, then her head was inclined. There was a strange fascination about the subject—just as there was about the man himself—which she could not resist.

Nothing loth to prolong the interview, and having nothing to call him away until the end of the road was reached, Will Rice leaned one arm across the back of the seat, and spoke:

"You have seen the man, have heard him speak, and know that he can at pleasure assume the manner of a gentleman. Who he is, or whence he came, I doubt if any other than himself could tell you. It is not difficult to see that at some time in the past, he has been used to far different company than that which he now

keeps. He is an educated man, is handsome in both face and figure, has an unlimited supply of assurance, and if all that is told is true, absolutely knows no fear."

"All this makes him a particularly dangerous man when he has once marked a victim, and I don't believe a week has passed since he first came to the surface as a confidence-man without at least one tragedy staining his record. He has been the principal in at least a score of street fights, and can boast as populous a private graveyard as any other desperado in the wild West. If no worse crime—as estimated here—could be brought up against him, he would be deemed a hero. As it is, he has a strong backing among the rougher element, who hardly ever go to sleep without feeling the dread touch of a noosed rope around their throats as they dream. For one friend, Monte Jim has a hundred enemies, and it is only a matter of time how soon he will have to flee for life, or die a dog's death."

"Less than one month ago, he came under the shadow of the rope. It happened on this road, though not on my train. He and his gang of human wolves had spotted a victim with a large sum of money; a man with a wife and several children, coming out to join a relative who was to take him into partnership."

"The gang soon got in their work. The foolish fellow was led on to betting at monte. He was permitted to win a few dollars, and then the trick of the marked card was brought into play, and hoping to double his little fortune—just as your cousin hoped—he put up every dollar he owned in the world. Of course he lost, for they took precious good care that he should have no possible chance to win. And then, as he saw his last dollar gone—as he thought of his wife and poor children—while the wolves who so mercilessly fleeced him were laughing at his agony, the poor devil snatched a pistol from one of them and thrusting the muzzle against his temple, fired and scattered his brains all over the lost money just as his wife, who somehow learned of her husband's peril, entered the coach."

"She fell across his corpse, and her little children sobbed at her side. A man picked her up and restored her to consciousness. He placed the money—stained with the blood and brains of the dead—in her hands. That man was Monte Jim!"

Medea was pale, shuddering at the direful picture, but now she looked up, her lips faintly forming the words:

"Then he cannot be all bad!"

Will Rice laughed, shortly, hardly.

"Monte Jim is no fool, whatever else may be brought against him. He heard the growing threats of the passengers who had witnessed the affair—heard them talking about a long rope and a short shrift. I don't say that this influenced his actions, for he's no coward. But I do know that he gave the blood-stained money to the widow, and then he and his gang jumped from the train and took their chances of breaking their necks rather than remain on the cars."

"This is only a single blot in the record he said I might show you, but from it you can readily imagine the rest. We are nearing Bismarck now, and I must leave you."

There was a perceptible tremor in his manly voice as he uttered these words, and his face was quickly averted as he turned to pick up his lantern. Only for a moment; then he bent toward her, speaking rapidly, earnestly:

"Miss Pennington, I trust you will not deem me too presumptuous in speaking thus, but I cannot leave you without once more warning you to beware of that demon in the shape of man. Something tells me that he means mischief in thus seeking you out; certainly he can meditate no good. Here is my card and address. If you ever feel the need of a friend who will go through fire and water to serve you, I beg of you to apply to me."

Medea took the proffered bit of pasteboard, wondering.

"I do not understand!" she faltered. "Pray speak plainer, if you know of any peril that threatens me."

"I do not know, though I can but suspect; Monte Jim won that money of your cousin, and got safely off the train with it. Yet he returns and restores his plunder, making that an excuse for forcing his acquaintance on you. He has some evil scheme in his cunning brain, and acted thus generously in order to see more readily gain the good opinion of your escort. You will hear from or see him again, but do not let his cunning arts blind your eyes to his real character. Good-by."

Will Rice cut his parting shorter than might have been the case had not the door of the coach just then opened to admit Alva Pennington, and not caring to have his warning overheard by that worthy, the conductor turned hastily away, brushing past Pennington without noticing the ugly scowl with which the jealous young man regarded him.

A few minutes later the end of the road was reached, and all was bustle and confusion as the weary passengers roused themselves to leave the coach.

But when Medea and her escort, the latter

loaded down with the bundles which invariably form a part of a woman's possessions when traveling, passed out of the coach, they were met by Will Rice, who gently assisted the young lady to alight, hurriedly whispering:

"I beg you to remember my warning, Miss Pennington. This is a frightfully rough and dangerous place for one so lovely, and you cannot be too careful whom you trust. If I can serve you in any way, pray command me. But first—for I forget you must regard me as a stranger—assure yourself that I am an honest man. Almost any person in town can tell you who and what I am. Now—good-by!"

A warm pressure of her hand, and he hastened away.

And as she gazed after him, Medea felt that she had lost a tried and true friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIGHTING THE TIGER.

THERE was a little trouble brewing within the classic precincts of the "Clipper Shades," at that date one of the bright, particular stars in the sporting firmament of Bismarck, though probably none save the initiated could have recognized the speck of war which was gradually developing itself into a threatening cloud that boded sudden death and destruction to one or more of those who then occupied the gambling-hall.

Curly Kaine, self-styled King of Bismarck, was the nominal head of a "lay-out," though it was rumored among the knowing that Curly was only a figure-head, acting under the pay and instructions of a certain black-browed beauty, whose character was rather more notorious than saintly. But be that as it may, Curly Kaine "run the machine" after his own fashion, and besides having the name of dealing a perfectly square game, maintained almost perfect order while he stood at the helm of the Clipper. As he was fond of saying, he meant to have peace if he had to fight for it, and the roughs and hard cases were not long in finding out what that meant.

A host in himself, Curly Kaine kept half a score fighting-men within call, whenever the tables were in play, and at a signal from the stalwart gambler, they were ready for hot work without stopping to count the odds against them.

This army was a profitable one, in a double sense. It saved the loss of time and destruction of valuable fixtures by speedily quelling all rows, while being a sort of guarantee to the more respectable class that they would not be risking their lives while staking their gold on the turn of a card.

From this very fact, the Clipper Shades became famous, and it was "the correct thing" for all sight-seeing tours to wind up with a call on the "King of Bismarck."

There was little of the wild commotion, the loud talk, the reckless drinking, the fight-provoking swaggering of heavily-armed bullies, so common in the gambling halls of border towns and mining-camps of the usual type. Save for the fact that every man present bore weapons, the great majority of them without the slightest attempt at concealment, and a little less conventionality in dress, one might have fancied himself in some Eastern saloon of fortune.

The space devoted to gambling was large, separated from the bar-room by a partition with an arched open space in the center, hung with heavy green curtains.

The apartment contained two large tables, each of which supported a faro lay-out, one on each side of the room. Beyond these were two more tables of the same size, one devoted to a roulette-wheel, the other to red and black. At the rear of the apartment, and in a line running down its center, were small, round-topped tables for the use of short card-players.

Above each of the four large tables hung massive chandeliers, filled with oil-lamps, the light from which illumined the room without further aid.

At one of the faro-tables Curly Kaine was seated, manipulating the polished silver box with a skill and grace peculiarly his own, and it was on his brow that the threatening speck of war first made itself visible.

Seated directly before him were two young men with whom the reader has some little acquaintance—Alva Pennington and Frank Lisle.

Forty-eight hours have elapsed since they reached Bismarck, but this is the first time either of them has set foot within the noted gaming house. Alva Pennington did not recognize the dealer until after placing his first wager on the cards. Then his first impulse was to draw out and seek some other chance for gratifying the gambling spirit which haunted him; but Curly Kaine gave out the faintest sign of recognizing him, and the young man waited until the fate of his first venture should be decided. He lost, and there was no longer any question. He settled down to "get even."

A true-born gambler in his love for the cards, Alva Pennington would never become a shining light among the fraternity. His blood was too hot, his temper too irritable, and the more he lost the more reckless became his playing. In addition to all this, he was what is known

among the fraternity as an "angel." In other words, he played faro in accordance with "a system," having favorite cards for backing at the beginning, middle and last of the deal, making little or no attempt to disguise his line of play, so that it required only a few deals for the watchful gambler to learn his system, when he was enabled to govern himself accordingly.

Curly Kaine was not the only person who noticed this, and as soon as he became a settled fact, a keen-eyed looker-on pushed his way through the double row of players, taking up his station directly behind and between the two young men, both of whom were seated next the table.

Thrice in succession he placed bank-notes on the cards selected by Alva Pennington, but with this difference: where the young man played to win, he "coppered," or risked his money on that being the banker's card.

There was a heavy game running, early though the night was, and as Curly Kaine acted as his own croupier, he did not immediately notice this peculiarity of play; but when Pennington had lost thrice in succession on cards which some other had coppered, he watched for the winner, and beheld Monte Jim.

Black eyes and blue met at the same instant—one shining steadily, the other flashing with deadly hatred. Only for a moment, however; then Curly Kaine resumed his dealing. But his massive features were whiter than ordinary, and his nimble fingers actually seemed to tremble as they manipulated the cards, raked in winnings and paid the more fortunate players.

Frank Lisle, too, seemed ill at ease. He played but little—barely sufficient to retain his claim to a seat—and more than once urged his friend in a whisper to draw out from the game, where the cards seemed to hold an especial spite against him, almost from the first.

"Drop it, man!" growled Pennington, as Curly Kaine was shuffling the cards for a fresh deal. "I'm not going to quit loser, as long as there's a shot left in the locker. If you're tired, pull out. I'll see you later."

"It's not your night, Al. If you won't quit for good, come and take a turn in the fresh air to change your luck."

With an impatient shrug of his shoulders in dissent, Pennington tossed a bank-note of a large denomination across the table for a fresh supply of chips, then backed his favorite cards as the dealer waited for the players to make their game.

And, just as promptly, Monte Jim backed the same cards to lose, when up flashed the dealer's black eyes, more than ever full of bitter dislike, though the voice of Curly Kaine was smooth and equable as he uttered:

"It is not often that I make any comment on the manner in which my patrons place their bets, but you, Monte Jim, are old enough at the business to know how quickly it rattles a man to have another steadily bet against his game. That makes the fourth time in succession you have bet your money against this gentleman's judgment."

"And what of it?" quietly retorted the other. "If the gentleman don't object, what are you kicking about?"

"Partly for his sake, as I am bound to guard the interests of all my patrons; partly because it may lead some to suspect this is a skin game, got up to beat the gent out of his money, with you inside the ring."

"No one would ever suspect you of putting up a brace, surely!" retorted Monte Jim with a low laugh that stung more keenly than if it had been a slap in the face, while giving not the slightest cause for resenting the speech.

It told on Curly Kaine, as his flushed, then paling face and flashing eyes betrayed to those who knew him best; and it was in a sharper tone that he made reply:

"If you two are playing in cahoots, come out flat-footed, so I'll know how to take you."

"Look here, Mister Man!" interposed Alva Pennington, the strong dislike which he felt for the gambler, with whom he had already had one little brush, showing itself in both tone and glance. "If you are alluding to me, don't let sympathy put you off your feed, for it's wholly uncalled for. I back my own judgment, with my own money, and don't care a continental copper how others look at it. If this gentleman, or any other, thinks he can make more money by betting against the cards I pick out to win, let him amuse himself. When I begin to squeal, it will be time enough for you to kick."

"That's talk with the bark on!" and Monte Jim nodded his approval of the bluntly spoken sentiments. "If the gentleman objects to my indulging in this fancy, he has only to say as much, and I'll draw out of the game until he has got enough of the tiger."

"Not on my account!" laughed Pennington. "If your judgment is better than mine, you're ahead and I'm behind; we can't both lose."

"That's just where you hit it, young gentleman!" quickly uttered Curly Kaine. "To a man up a tree, it looks like a sort of whip-saw arrangement between you two."

"Which would be mighty apt to do its cutting on the wrong side, were we partners, and idiots

enough to put up our money after that fashion," and Monte Jim, for the first time, began to show signs of irritation. "Where would we be when we tumbled up against a split? Ont half our stakes, with nothing to show for it."

"That's chin-music enough!" impatiently interrupted Alva Pennington. "If you're afraid to deal for more than one man at a time, why don't you hang out a sign?"

"Afraid nothing!" growled the gambler, now wrought up to fever-heat, and controlling himself only by a desperate effort of will. "When you try to teach me the laws of faro, Monte Jim, you want to go to school first. There's no split on the last turn, when cue-cards are free."

"But the odds are six to one against hitting the turn, and you only pay four to one when it is correctly called—odds sufficient for a hog! But let that pass."

"If you are cowed, you have your option. Say that your bank is burst, and close the game until you can open it with only players of your own fancy. Set a price on the privilege of running the bank for one evening, and I'll pay it. Maybe I cannot fill the dealer's chair quite so gracefully as you can, but of one thing you may be sure; I'll not kick at any bet, big or little, as long as my boodle holds out."

For a brief space there was silence so profound that one might have heard a fly walking—as one of the eager on-lookers solemnly asserted the next day.

All who knew anything of the two men, believed them pure grit, and it was equally well known that there was no love lost between them. For a month or more the sports had been on the lookout for a collision between the twain, eager to be within eyesight when it did occur, for that it would be a memorable struggle, one and all granted.

Instinctively the ranks began to open, after that brief pause of breathless suspense, as though to make way for the burning of powder; and this movement seemed to recall the two men to their senses.

Sharp and clear rung the voice of Curly Kaine:

"We'll resume this discussion after business hours, Monte Jim. Will that suit you?"

"All hours are the same to me, my dear sir," was the soft response. "My ears will be open when you knock, never fear."

"Cut each other's throats as quick as you please," growled Alva Pennington, impatiently rattling his checks before him. "I reckon the town wouldn't go into mourning if it never saw either of you again. But, meantime, my money is up and waiting for the cards. If you mean to deal, cut loose."

His face as impassive as that of a marble statue, showing not the slightest trace of the storm which had so recently convulsed it, Curly Kaine began dealing the cards, placing them as drawn from the silver box, in two piles, side by side.

At the prospect of a shooting-match taking place across the table, the other players had drawn out of the game, leaving only Monte Jim and the two young men betting. As before, the dashing sport placed his bets in direct opposition to those made by Alva Pennington, and the cynical smile which curled his mustached lips, grew more and more pronounced as his wagers were won, almost without an exception, throughout the deal.

Steadily the pile of chips before Pennington grew lower. He bought more, and as though in hopes of retrieving his heavy losses by still bolder play, he increased his stakes until at the latter part of the deal, he was again reduced to checks on a single card.

Another turn, and those, too, were swept from the board, while Monte Jim won a nearly equal amount.

Again the excited Alva drew forth his wallet, and once more Frank Lisle endeavored to coax him away, but in vain. The fever was upon him, and he would not be choked off while he could raise money for another wager.

It had come to the last turn, the favorite betting point for daring gamblers, since, though the odds are heavily against their hitting the turn, success in doing so is repaid four-fold the amount risked.

Curly Kaine paused in his dealing, giving time for those playing to make their bets. In the box, according to the cue-cards, were three cards: besides the one exposed by the previous deal: king, queen and deuce. The queen was one of the cards which Pennington had favored throughout the game, and on this card he dropped his last stake, crying:

"Deuce-queen, with the king in hoc, for a thousand!"

CHAPTER IX.

MONTE JIM CATCHES THE TURN.

His face as white as chalk, his eyes glowing with a feverish light, Alva Pennington leaned partly across the table on which rested almost the last dollar which he could rightly call his own, depending on the turn of a card.

Behind him stood Monte Jim, cold and impassive, making no move toward placing his money or chips, though Curly Kaine delayed

his dealing as though to give him time to make up his mind which card to back.

"All placed, gentlemen?" he said, with a swift glance toward his rival. "There's a few slugs left in the bank for those who've got the grit to reach out for them. No one else wants to get rich? After so much wind, I expected to experience a perfect hail-storm!"

A little contrary to the etiquette of faro, where money talks instead of man, but this unwritten rule is seldom enforced in the "wild and woolly West," and that night was an exception to the general run in still other respects.

A little buzz of interest ran around the group of eager spectators, and many a covert glance was cast toward Monte Jim, for whose especial benefit they knew this taunt was flung out by the King of Bismarck; but if the Black Sheep felt it or recognized them, he gave no outward token of either.

"My money is up—deal for it!" growled Pennington, as he moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

Exposed to view in the open-faced box was the four of spades, being the winning card of the previous turn. With one white finger-tip pressing lightly upon this card, Curly Kaine slowly slipped it through the slit in the side of the box, this action uncovering the deuce, which lay directly beneath.

Again that subdued humming, for since the deuce was the banker's card, all could see that the bold better's chances of hitting the turn were now even. King and queen alone remained in the box, and on the order of their appearance depended the last note of Alva Pennington's little fortune.

For a moment the dealer paused, with a covert glance at the white, hard set countenance of the young gambler; then his fingers made a lightning motion, and the fatal card lay wholly revealed to sight.

A quick drawing of breath on the part of the spectators; then all eyes were turned curiously upon the unlucky gamester to see how he bore up under this final stroke. For Alva Pennington had failed to catch the turn; the king was the winning card, while the queen remained *in hoc*!

Those who anticipated a scene, however, were doomed to suffer disappointment, for, now that he knew the worst, Alva Pennington showed true grit.

"Good-by, old fellow!" he laughed, in a hard, dry tone, nodding at the bank-note as Curly Kaine drew it toward him. "Gone over to the majority! Well, such is life in the Far West! Sorry to part so early, old fellow," with a nod across the table to the dealer; "but I've run my limit for this evening. See you again, with a longer pole next time."

He was pushing back his chair to arise, when a hand was gently placed upon his shoulder, and the voice of Monte Jim greeted his ears with the words:

"The evening is young yet, Mr. Pennington, and surely you will not draw out yet? The next turn may be yours. Ill-fortune cannot always haunt a man."

"Money talks here, as I suppose you are aware," remarked the young gambler, with a hard laugh. "If steamboats were selling at one cent a dozen, I couldn't buy a rotten plug from a wrecked yawl!"

"I owe you one thousand dollars; permit me to pay it now, before I forget it," said Monte Jim, in easy tones, as he selected a couple of bank-notes from a large roll, and dropped them on the table before the astonished man.

One glance at them, long enough to show him that each one called for five hundred dollars, then Alva Pennington turned toward the dashing sport, his face pale, his eyes gleaming.

"What do you mean by that? You owe me nothing; then why make the offer? Do you mean to insult me, sir?"

"Not for the world, my dear sir," was the hasty assurance given by Monte Jim. "If I did not feel that you had a rightful claim on that money, most assuredly I should never have offered it to you."

"But how? I don't understand!"

"Yet it is very simple, and only in accordance with a custom which has become a rule among all gamblers, like myself, for instance; a fair division of spoils," he laughed, softly.

"That's all right among partners, of course; which you and I never were nor ever will be. I played my own game, and you played yours. I'm not so hard up that I need receive charity."

Harsh and blunt as were his words, Alva Pennington rarely appeared to better advantage than at that moment, when rudely repulsing the offer made by Monte Jim. Many of those around had set him down for an insolent prig, but they entertained widely different sentiments now, though a few among the crowd mentally pronounced him a fool for refusing the windfall.

The cheek of Monte Jim slightly flushed, but there was no trace of anger in his tones as he added:

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Pennington. For more reasons than one, you are the last man in the world to whom I would offer charity unsolicited. That money, according to the un-

written rule I mentioned, is rightfully your own, and I beg of you to accept it."

"First prove your words."

"I had made up my mind to chance the turn, with a couple of thousand, but you got ahead of me, and staked your money precisely as I had intended. All the evening I had been playing directly opposite to your choice, and I couldn't veer around so suddenly; so I held my money. You lost, and by preventing my betting, saved me two thousand dollars. By rights, one-half belongs to you, and there it is. Oblige me."

"That's too thin, old fellow," said Pennington, with a short laugh, picking up the bills and handing them to Monte Jim. "I don't know why you're so mighty anxious to get rid of your money, but you can't shove it off on me in that style!"

"Blow it in, and we'll divide winnings," urged Monte Jim.

"Thanks, but that ain't my style. I play my own money or none. If your pocket is running over, no doubt there are other gentlemen here who will oblige you by taking a portion."

"Will you accept it as a loan, then?"

Alva Pennington stared wonderingly into the face of the strangely-persistent sport. He saw something in those deep-blue eyes that puzzled him, and from intending to sharply reject this final offer, he caught himself asking:

"Tell me why you persist in forcing this money on me, and then I'll give you an answer once for all."

Monte Jim laughed faintly, and hesitated for a moment, casting a swift glance around him. But when he spoke his tones were clear and distinct enough for all to catch.

"Well, you know I'm a gambler, and like the majority, I am slightly superstitious. Firmly believing you have a better right to that money than I have, I offered it to you. If I took it back again, I believe ill-luck would haunt me until I got rid of it for good and all. I came here with the express purpose of breaking the bank, but if you still refuse to take the money, as a loan, if nothing else, I'll have to draw out."

"Oh, if you put it in that light, I don't mind," said the young man, drawing back the bills. "I never yet saw the cash that I deemed unlucky, until after I'd lost it for good."

During this conversation, so out of the ordinary run, Curly Kaine had been quietly shuffling the cards, exhibiting an unwonted degree of patience at the delay. Now, when a decision had been reached, he placed the pack inside the silver box, and calmly waited for bets to be placed.

Pennington passed the bills across the table to receive their equivalent in chips, then placed a couple of bets on the cards, following the same system that had led him to grief before. And with an impassive countenance, Monte Jim wagered the same amount on the same cards, but played them to win for the bank, by "coppering."

Steadily Curly Kaine drew forth the cards, making several turns before any bets were won or lost. The first change that came took the form of a "split," two queens coming out in the same turn, and in accordance with the laws governing the game, he was entitled to take one-half the amount staked on the card, that privilege being one of the greatest percentages of the game of faro.

Pennington frowned, but replaced the amount subtracted by the dealer. Monte Jim picked up his chips and held them in hand, his face as immobile as though he wore a waxen mask.

The second turn following, Pennington won on the ace, and as Monte Jim had coppered the card, Curly Kaine raked down his bet to pay that of the other player.

Once more Pennington let his wager stand, only adding the sum of his winnings, evidently resolved to break or make.

On the contrary, Monte Jim contented himself with watching the game, though the dealer paused for a few moments, as though to give him an opportunity to place his bets.

A little buzz ran through the ranks of the spectators a few moments later, as still another "split" came out, this time on aces, by which means Pennington lost all that he had so recently won on the same card.

Curly Kaine cast a covert glance upward at his rival, and caught the faintest suspicion of a smile for his pains. His dark face flushed, then turned pale as death, and his fingers perceptibly trembled as he drew the next turn.

One by one the cards were drawn and placed upon their respective piles. Now Pennington won, then he lost, and as the deal came near an end, a third split came out of the cards which the young gambler had made his favorites.

This was something unusual in a single deal, and Pennington muttered imprecations beneath his breath, but they were directed against the ill-luck which haunted him, and contained not the slightest suspicion that any save perfectly fair dealing was taking place.

After the fate of his bets, as placed before the deal began, was decided, Monte Jim did not place another until Curly Kaine paused for the last turn. Even then he held his hand until Pennington placed his entire stakes on the queen

to win, just as he had done in the preceding deal.

"Wait a bit, your majesty," called out Monte Jim, as the dealer was about to take out the card which concealed the final turn. "Now that all splits are out, I reckon I'll give you a little benefit. What is your limit this evening? I don't want to make you lose your nerve by overbetting."

Curly Kaine looked up, his black eyes snapping with the anger he had so long held in check.

"You know the rules of the game well enough. If you bet notes, the limit is one thousand for each bet. If you play chips, the bank is bound to meet whatever you bet."

"All right, old fellow; no harm in asking for information. Oblige me by giving me checks for that note," and he tossed a bank-bill across the table, a little murmur of excitement arising among the spectators as they caught sight of the figures which marked the corner.

CHAPTER X.

A DISCROWNED KING.

THE faro-dealer picked up the bill, scrutinizing it with ostentatious care, holding it up to the light and viewing it from different angles, as though strongly suspecting it to be counterfeit, and all this so pointedly that not one present could doubt his meaning. But Monte Jim only smiled at the intended insult, as he drawled:

"A curiosity in your eyes, no doubt, King Curly. If it wasn't against my principles to give away trifles, I'd beg you to accept a half-dozen to hang up in your room to look at and familiarize yourself with, so that you wouldn't be knocked out of time when you chance to meet one in company."

An audible smile ran around the room, but Curly Kaine glanced up with an air of mock innocence as he replied:

"Excuse me: I fancied I detected blood spots on the note, and I wished to see whether it came from the veins of a man or a woman. Perhaps you are able to give the information?"

The shot was so sudden and unexpected that it struck home, with a certainty that Monte Jim, admirable actor though he was, and with almost perfect command over the muscles of his face, could not entirely disguise. His face turned white as that of a corpse, his eyes filled with a reddish glow, his teeth came together with a savage click, and for a brief space it seemed as though he meant to cross the barrier at a bound and bury his twitching fingers in the throat of the gambler who had dealt him such a bitter blow from ambush.

Curly Kaine himself anticipated some such action, and his right hand dropped swiftly beneath the edge of the table, his fingers closing on the butt of a double-action revolver resting on a little shelf directly before him, ready to pull and fire at an instant's notice.

But once more the threatened collision was averted. The King of the Monte Men regained the self-control momentarily lost, and with a careless smile, retorted:

"If you are really seeking information, instead of trying to dodge a bet beyond your nerve to cover, Curly, I'll be happy to enlighten you—when you make me that business call. Will you oblige me by tumbling out those chips?"

"If you prefer them, of course," was the cool response. "Ordinary rules don't apply between two of the profession, however, and I'll be only too happy to cover your money to any amount, whether in chips or bank notes."

"Good enough! I'll take you at your word. I am sorry I didn't come better prepared to buck against your royal highness, but maybe this will do for a starter."

As he spoke Monte Jim took back the bill, and joining it with another of the same denomination, placed them on the gaudily-painted lay-out.

According to the cue-cards kept by the players, the box now contained, besides the nine-spot of hearts, which, as the last winning card, was now fully exposed to view, the queen of clubs, the six of the same suit, and the ten of diamonds.

By the manner in which he had strung his chips, Alva Pennington showed that his call consisted of ten-queen-six; or, staking his money, that his favorite card, the queen, would prove the winning one in the final turn.

Apparently in accordance with the plan he had adopted on first coming into the game, Monte Jim went in direct opposition to the judgment of his fellow-gambler. As he could not readily "string" his notes to express his call, the dashing sport carelessly dropped his money on the six-spot.

"There's ten thousand dollars that I catch the turn. My money says it is queen-six-ten. And now, Curly Kaine, King of Bismarck; just let me say one more word before you touch those papers, and I'm going to give it to you straight as a string, too!"

"Wind won't buy whisky nor pay for kerosene," sharply interposed the dealer. "If you've got any more of those little pictures to

squander, give your jaw a rest, and let the money talk for you."

"Dip lightly, Curly! I'm little old business this evening, and whatever I say I'm bound to back up, if it takes a leg. Be sure you only draw one card at a time, for if you try any of your double-edged tricks, you'll hear something drop, sure!"

Turning ghastly white, the dealer paused with his fingers on the top card, his eyes glittering like living coals as he glared defiance into the face of his audacious rival.

"Do you dare hint that I am dealing foul?" he demanded, his voice sounding harsh and strained.

"I never hint, Curly. All I'm asking for is fair play, of which these gentlemen," with a graceful wave of his gloved hand toward the close-crowded ranks of eager spectators, "will be the judges. Many a man who once stood to the full as high in popular estimation as you do this night, has fallen from grace for the sake of winning or not losing a less sum than depends on this turn. I don't say that you have any intention of cheating; I only say that should you make the attempt, I'll kill you, sure as you are now warming that chair!"

"Your words are an insult, Monte Jim!" grated the dealer.

"Insult goes, then!" was the blunt retort. "Put it in your pocket and keep it warm until after the fate of our loose change is decided."

"You shall answer for all this—"

"Good enough!" and for the first time Monte Jim allowed his mask to slip sufficiently to discover his real earnestness, the actual intensity of his hatred for the man who sat opposite him, fairly quivering with the rage and longing for revenge which he struggled so hard to hold in check for the time being. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear; it hits me right where I live! You're a burning disgrace to the town, Curly Kaine, and I have taken a solemn oath to run you out of it, or get boosted for good and all myself! I came here this evening, not only to break your bank, but to expose you as a dirty trickster—No you don't, Curly!"

As though by magic, a short, stubby-locking derringer appeared in each hand of the plain-talking sport, the wide muzzles barely extending beyond his fingers as his gloved hands reached half-way across the table, in answer to a quick movement of Curly Kaine, whose revolver was now barely visible above the edge of the table.

Only the lightning activity of the monte-player saved his life, for there was death in the red glowing eyes of the faro dealer. But, once more Monte Jim had the drop, and held the life of his rival wholly at his mercy, did he feel inclined to make the most of his advantage. A slight pressure of his fingers would send a brace of ounce-balls crashing through the brain of Curly Kaine, before that worthy could possibly bring his revolver into play.

Again the spectators hurriedly scattered, some dropping to the floor in their haste to find safety from the lead that one and all felt positive would be set in motion as quickly as human fingers could contract. But once more they were in error, for Monte Jim spoke, instead of shooting:

"You're my meat, Curly, if you don't drop that tool in a precious hurry. Salt won't save you—nor can your heels get in a shot from behind quick enough. I came here armed at all points, and if a free fight is on the programme, you can just bet your sweet life that your gang won't have all the fun on their side. Drop that plaything!—hands above-board!"

Sullenly the faro-dealer obeyed. He saw that Monte Jim spoke within bounds; that certain death must be the penalty of either delay or refusal, without giving him the slightest chance to carry his rival down in death with him; and, dropping his revolver, he brought his hands empty above the board.

"I appeal to you, gentlemen," he said, his voice husky and unnatural. "Is it the clean white thing to crowd a man so?"

"If you are playing white, what I say will hurt me far more than it will you," was the blunt reply of Monte Jim, in whose hands still showed the weapons. "On the contrary, if, as I firmly believe, you are using foul means to win the money of your patrons, you deserve a thousand times worse treatment."

"But this is enough chin-music for once. Our money waits on the cards. Deal, and only one card at a time, or over goes your meat-house, for good and all! I say it—Monte Jim!"

A sickly smile distorted the ghastly-white countenance of the dealer, but he dared no longer refuse to deal.

"No man ever yet caught me putting up a brace, nor will you be the first, Monte Jim," he said, slowly slipping aside the nine-spot of hearts.

A low, grating curse hissed through the tightly-clinched teeth of Alva Pennington, as he caught his first glimpse of the card on which he had staked his all; for it lay immediately beneath the nine-spot, making it the banker's card!

"Burst!" he gratefully exclaimed, striking the table so fiercely with his fists that the dents of

his knuckles showed plainly through the oil-cloth covering.

"Touch lightly, Curly!" warningly muttered Monte Jim, his blue eyes all aglow. "One card at a time, if you please!"

A barely perceptible hesitation, then the dealer slowly moved the queen, and a wild cry came from the excited crowd as they beheld the six-spot of clubs lying next card!

CHAPTER XI.

MONTE JIM AS A MORAL EXHIBITOR.

THERE was death in the glowing black orbs of the King of Bismarck as he lifted them to the face of his rival with a surly, wolfish snarl in his tones as he muttered:

"Are you satisfied now, Monte Jim?"

"I'd be a hog if I wasn't," laughed the successful gambler, still keeping on his guard, however. "I had an idea I could catch the turn, and, as you see, my theory was correct. Pay your debts, old fellow!"

"I always pay them—and I'll settle with you, be sure of that, Monte Jim!" grated Curly Kaine, viciously.

"There's prussic acid and aquafortis in your tones, old boy, but I reckon there's drug store enough about me to stand the blast for a time. Pay the gold, first, then we can settle up our little lead or steel account after your own liking."

"I'll not let it slip your mind, Monte, rest assured of that," said Curly Kaine, with a white, sickly smile, as his practiced fingers quickly counted over the sum of cash which his bank contained, and pushed it partly across the table.

"Your stake was ten thousand. It called for four times its face, making forty thousand dollars. Am I correct?"

"Straight as a string, old fellow."

"Here is twenty-one thousand, four hundred and sixty-five dollars in cash, as part payment—"

"Bank bu'sted and you going into bankruptcy, eh?" sneered Monte Jim, swiftly cutting his deliberate speech short. "Want to compound for fifty cents on the dollar, I suppose?"

"Don't squeal before you're hurt, Monte," was the cool retort. "I never yet failed to square accounts with my customers, and rather than fall short with you, I'd coin every drop of my heart's blood into pennies, and pawn my soul for the balance!"

For one instant the crust was broken, giving a glimpse of the burning lava beneath. Hatred the most intense fairly transformed that handsome countenance into the visage of a veritable demon; but Monte Jim never flinched, never took his mocking gaze from his adversary, feeling confident that his allies could be trusted to guard his rear against the "heelers" of Curly Kaine.

"In other words, perform impossibilities!" laughed Monte Jim. "For heart you never had, and that which serves you as a soul was mortgaged to Satan in the hour of your birth!"

"But a truce to compliments. Do you offer this sum as full payment of my claim against you?"

"Only as far as it goes," quietly responded the gambler, taking a check-book from his pocket and using a stylographic pen to fill in the blanks as he spoke. "I don't want it whispered over town that I killed you to get rid of paying a debt contracted over the papers. I didn't expect such a run on the bank this evening, or I would have been better prepared to meet it. As it is, I must ask you to accept my check for the balance due. If you have any doubts concerning it, possibly Mr. Morgan will be kind enough to assure you that I have in his hands ample funds to meet your demands."

"It's good as new wheat," nodded the banker named.

Curly Kaine dropped the check upon the pile of gold and bank-notes, pushing them across to the winner, adding:

"Now are you satisfied, Monte Jim?"

"As far as my winnings go—yes."

"Count it over and be sure you're satisfied."

"I prefer taking your word for it, just at present, my dear fellow," laughed the dashing sport, whose hands still clasped the heavy-calibered derringers, ready for instant use.

"Very well. Now I demand my turn!"

"All right, my covey! You shall have your wish—satisfaction till you can't rest!" coolly retorted the sport.

"I am some thirty-eight thousand dollars ahead of the game on this evening's play—call it that, anyhow. I'm open to stake it all, double or quits, that I can prove you a barefaced swindler and common cheat right here and now! If you're the clean white article, you'll jump at the chance to get your money back, to say nothing of showing me up to these gentlemen as a liar and calumniator. Money talks, old man!"

Sharp and stern rung out the voice of Monte Jim, each word striking its mark with the directness and force of a bullet. Curly Kaine turned ghastly white at the bold defiance, and his hands mechanically moved to cover the dealing-box.

"Fingers off, your roval highness!" cried Monte Jim, his blue eyes glittering like those of

a serpent about to strike. "My money is on the board, and I reckon it is about all you'll care to play for, this bout. Let the papers rest until we have decided this little point. Double or quits that you are a thief—that you have been dealing a skin game all this evening! Do you take the bet?"

For a brief space there came no reply. Curly Kaine, his eyes turning red, his face that of a wild beast driven to a corner from whence escape seems impossible, glared around the room. He saw his "heelers," dark-browed and sullen; but he saw, too, that Monte Jim's gang was on the alert, and so stationed that any movement on the part of his men could be instantly check-mated.

Nor was there a gleam of hope to be extracted from the dense group of spectators. A charge of foul murder would have been less dangerous to him, under the circumstances. That, even if proved, would show him a sinner against only a single man; a charge of foul dealing arrayed the entire community against him, turning former friends into bitter enemies so long as the accusation remained unrefuted.

His brain was in a whirl, and his thoughts so confused that he was wholly at a loss what course to pursue. Yet he saw that his hesitation, brief though it had been, was turning the feelings of the crowd still more thoroughly against him, and in his utter desperation he snarled:

"You can make a mighty bold front because you know that I am unable to cover your money. The bank is broken—"

A cold, metallic laugh cut him short as Monte Jim picked up his winnings and stuffed them into his pocket.

"All right, your majesty. I never crowd a bet when a man shows he lacks the sand to meet it. But all the same, I'm bound to prove my claim of foul dealing."

"If I do prove it, I'll leave your punishment in the hands of these gentlemen, for you have done them more harm than you have me, so far as wealth goes. If I fail—if you come out of the fire as refined gold—then you can pronounce sentence against me for my error, and I'll never lift a finger to prevent your putting it into execution."

"Will some honest man kindly consent to count those cards which Curly Kaine used in dealing last?"

The cornered gambler showed his teeth in a savage snarl.

"Whoever dares to take a hand in this game must settle with me! I'll not be insulted with impunity!"

"Look here, Mr. Kaine," said Morgan, speaking firmly as he pressed closer to the table.

"You're only making a bad matter worse by uttering such threats. I, for one, do not believe the charge brought against you; but it has been brought, and must be settled in one way or the other, for your own sake. If it is slurred over now, one-half the town will always believe you guilty of running a skin game, and your business will suffer. You can trust me, and I offer to count those cards."

"That's not the point," muttered Curly Kaine.

"That card-cheat caught the turn, if he didn't 'snake' my tools to make all sure, and now tries to cover his tracks by bringing this dirty charge against me. I appeal to the crowd—which of us has got the cleanest record as square men?"

"Too thin, old fellow," laughed Monte Jim, "and you can't turn the tide by a dam of sand like that. As to your first insinuation, I did catch the turn as you put it up, and instead of your skinning me, I took your hide."

"While I was busy talking with Mr. Pennington, you were stocking the cards. That was all right. If the players are green enough to permit you to take that advantage, in addition to the regular odds in favor of the dealer, they alone are to blame. I saw you putting up the turn. It was diamond cut diamond, and I got the bulge on you. Once more, I say that was all right. If you've done no worse than stock the cards, putting up splits and regular tricks of that sort, I'll own up that I'm a fool, and restore the money I won by catching the turn."

"All tricks of that sort go, if they are performed above-board, and those on the opposite side are simple enough to permit such doings; but you have no leave or license to wring in the odd card on them!"

"You lie in your throat if you dare even hint such a thing!" snarled Curly Kaine, his blazing eyes fixed upon his adversary, ready to endeavor to dodge the shot which he felt positive this defiance would call forth, hoping to escape with at least life sufficient to kill his foe before dying himself.

But Monte Jim did not fall into the snare, as expected. Judging from himself, he had little difficulty in divining the forlorn hope of the penned-up gambler, and only smiled cynically at the desperate subterfuge.

"I'd sink a mineral shaft in your carcass for that, only I prefer to carry out my original plan, Curly Kaine," he said, calmly, still holding the gambler wholly at his mercy. "Which one of us is the liar will be proven soon enough."

"Why cut any more time to waste?" impatiently demanded Morgan, the banker. "In

those cards lies the truth or falsity of your charge against Mr. Kaine. It is a disreputable affair from beginning to end, and I am ashamed of myself for having become mixed up in it at all, through my natural impetuosity. But, since I have entered it, I'm ready to put it through without unnecessary delay."

"I believe I'm tolerably well known in this town. If any stain rests on my record, as a square man and friend to the right, it has never been brought up against me."

"That every man knows!" cried an enthusiastic voice from some place in the crowd.

"You're mighty right!" echoed another. "Let the old gent sift the business, an' then we all 'll know it's on the squar', without any hoo-doo fixin's."

"I, for one, am more than satisfied to have you act as referee between us," frankly uttered Monte Jim. "But first, I beg the privilege of partly explaining my reasons for exposing this fellow, and the cause I have for swearing to drive him out of Bismarck for good and all."

"There has been little love lost between us, as you all are aware, since we set up in business here; but that was only the natural rivalry existing between two men of the same profession—if skinning 'angels' can be called such. There was room and business enough for us both, and doubtless we would have pulled along without coming in actual collision, only for a little circumstance which transpired on the in-train, two evenings ago."

"I happened to catch Curly Kaine insulting a lady passenger, and, by getting the drop, I obliged him to apologize to her, and then leave the coach. He swore to get even with me, and it is not his fault that he has not yet made his threats good, for he lost little time in trying to get in his work."

"Twice, since that time, he has had my life attempted, but my good luck stuck by me, and I got off clear. From the first I suspected to whom I owed these attentions, but as I had no positive proof, I lay low and waited for the next deal. And I caught the turn, too!"

"The second attempt was made, and I managed to down the fellow without hurting him much, or raising a row to call attention, from outsiders. I questioned the rascal closely, and by offering him his life, managed to extract the truth from his lips. He is ready to swear that Curly Kaine offered him five hundred dollars to do for me."

"Another infernal lie!" grated the gambler, with difficulty refraining from daring certain death and leaping at the throat of his rival. "If he swears that, it's because your money has bought him, body and soul!"

"Let it go at that, then," coolly retorted Monte Jim. "Fortunately I don't require his services any longer, for, to be frank, I'd hesitate about trusting the fellow on oath, myself—he has associated so long with Curly Kaine!"

"Talk enough," impatiently interposed Morgan. "We have nothing to do with your outside quarrel. You have charged Mr. Kaine with playing a brace on his customers. That is quite sufficient for the present. Unless Mr. Kaine objects, I will count the cards and see if they are correct."

A ghastly smile played on the face of the gambler.

"It's little I have to say in this case, it appears. That liar has me lined. You are all opposed to me, and any appeal for fair play might as well be addressed to ears of stone, for all the satisfaction I can get from this crowd. Go on, if you like; but mark my words, for they mean business, chuck-up!"

"If I am not murdered this night, I'll call you one and all to a bitter account for these foul insults! I'll kill each and every rascal who takes a hand in this game! Now, Mr. Morgan, proceed, if you think you can stand the racket!"

Sternly composed, Morgan counted the cards, and pronounced them correct in number, so far as dealt. Snarling, Curly cried:

"Now are you satisfied, Monte Jim—curse your heart?"

"Not quite, my fine fellow. Mr. Morgan, please see how many more cards remain in the box. If they don't count up to fifty-three, then Curly Kaine may have me for a target!"

Morgan reached for the box, but with a startling crash, the four chandeliers fell from the ceiling—a pistol-shot rung out—a wild yell followed the explosion, as of a man in mortal agony—and confusion the most intense reigned throughout the darkened apartment!

CHAPTER XII.

"PROF. KING SMITH, OF MANDAN."

THAT same evening was destined to prove momentous to at least one other character in whose fate we are interested, and nearly as possible at the same time that Alva Pennington and Frank Lisle entered the Clipper Shades, a frowzy-headed, dirty-cheeked boy who officiated as general factotum at the hotel where the Penningtons were stopping, stood mumbling in the open door of Medea's chamber:

"A gent down in the pearlor, mum, which he axed fer to see ye, mum, ef you'd be so kind as to come down fer a wee, mum."

Medea was perplexed by this peculiarly de-

livered message and stood gazing at the abashed lad without fully comprehending his meaning. The boy slightly raised one elbow, as though to ward off a blow as she advanced a step, but it was a purely mechanical gesture, born of a sad experience.

"Them's jest what he said fer me to say, mum, an' 'tain't my fault ef it don't hit ye right whar ye live, be it, now?"

"You are certain you have not made a mistake in the number of the room? You are positive I am the person asked for?"

A broad grin cracked the dirt crust, and the reply came promptly, more distinct:

"Deed, mum, an' how could I? The gent axed fer to see the leddy who boarded here, an' I reckon it'd puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer fer to find any other then jest you, mum. Wimmen is most powerful skeerce in these yer diggin's—most powerful 'skeerce—an' divil a lie in that, axin pardin, mum."

"Did he send no card—did he give you his name?"

"Never a name, mum, unless it was prented onto the toe o' his boot, an' I dodged that afore it could ketch me," grinned the messenger. "Ef it's keerds you want, mum, I kin fetch up a deck in a minnit—an' it shain't cost ye a cent, ef I hev to steal 'em, mum!"

With unusual alacrity for him, the ragged imp was about to speed away to supply this fancied want, when Medea restrained him by a gesture, then decided:

"Wait a moment, and you may show me down-stairs. You are certain the gentleman did not mention his name? You don't know who he is?"

The youngster shook his head until the tangled locks of tow-colored hair fell over his eyes.

With a short, faint laugh, Medea Pennington conquered her nervousness, and closing the door behind her, followed her impish guide down the steep, narrow flight of stairs to the room on the ground floor, which was dignified by the name of parlor, only to be deserted by the lad when he jerked his head toward the closed door, saying as he scuttled off:

"Thar she be, in yender, mum—the boss is yelpin' fer me, an' thar'll be a holy picnic ef I keep him waitin'."

Medea paused in the dimly-lighted passage, half-inclined to retreat to her room, and thus avoid the interview so queerly solicited.

Her first thought had been that her visitor was Will Rice, whom she had not met or heard of since their hasty parting at the depot eight-and-forty hours ago; but she had hardly left her room before this idea was dismissed. Surely he would have acted with a little more regard for the proprieties—would have sent up his card, or his name, at least? And yet, if not Will Rice, who could it be? What gentleman could possibly be seeking an interview with her—unless—

There arose before her the vision of a tall, graceful figure, a strong, handsome face from which beamed eyes of the deepest blue, soft and lustrous as those of a woman, yet filled with a magnetic power whose peculiar influence she had not yet been entirely able to conquer; the face, figure, and eyes of the man who had called himself Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck!

Obedying the impulse which so suddenly seized her, Medea Pennington glided forward, and turning the knob, pushed wide the door and crossed the threshold—to discover the next instant that neither of her suspicions were correct.

It was a perfect stranger who turned swiftly from the little mirror in which he seemed to have been admiring his own reflection, as the door opened, snatching off his silk hat and bowing low in evident confusion at having been caught in this Narcissus-like occupation.

"Most happy, Miss Pennington—allow me!" he mumbled, almost stumbling at full length in his confused haste to offer the young lady a chair. "So very kind of you—I hardly dared hope you would grant me an interview."

His courtesy was acknowledged by a cold bow but the young lady made no offer to accept the proffered convenience.

"There must be some mistake—"

"Not if your name is Miss Medea Pennington, of Chicago," was the swift interruption. "That is your name?"

Still colder was her bow. This person impressed her most disagreeably. Possibly because she had expected to behold one different in almost every respect.

And yet, the stranger's get-up was fairly gorgeous, after a certain fashion. His rather pudgy person was tightly inclosed in a suit of black broadcloth, plainly intended for a man considerably taller and less chunky, since his stumpy hands were almost hidden from sight by the cuffs, and the ends of his trowsers lay in folds over his brilliantly-polished boots, while the coat was strained almost to tearing in order to make it meet across his chest. His silk hat was painfully smooth and shiny. What linen was visible to the eye shone like polished ivory. A gaudy brilliant shone in his scarf, while his short fingers glittered with rings, and a huge bunch of seals dangled from his fob. His hair was curled and glistened with oil. His

round, beardless, ruddy face glowed as though it had been soaped and dry-polished for the occasion.

The only dull point about him was his little pig-eyes, of a pale, watery-blue color.

"Then there is no mistake," he added, with a sigh—almost a grunt—of evident relief.

"You are a perfect stranger to me, sir," was her cold comment. "I expected to meet a friend, or I should not have come at all. You can have no business with me that cannot be more properly transacted by my cousin, Mr. Pennington."

Bowing again, she was about leaving the room when the fat little man hastily checked her with the words:

"It's about Lloyd Pennington, ma'am—"

"What do you know of him?" Medea sharply cried, turning so abruptly that the man started back, catching his heel on a fold of his trowsers, almost tripping himself up.

"Dear me, Miss Pennington, you almost take my breath away! You do, indeed!" he gasped, dropping his hat and making a vain effort to catch it, but only succeeding in knocking it to the further corner of the room. "My nerves are so delicate—the merest trifle completely upsets me. It does, indeed!"

A husky, spasmodic laugh came gurgling from his fat neck. His stumpy hands rubbed together. His fishy eyes seemed about to start from their sockets. Then, with a bobbing bow, he turned and rushed into the corner after his hat.

But instead of immediately securing it, he drew a small bottle and a teaspoon from his pocket, pouring a few drops of some dark liquid from one into the other, swallowed the dose, caught up his hat as the articles vanished, then turned once more toward Medea, smiling and smirking profusely.

"I most humbly beg your pardon, Miss Pennington, but I really could not help it! It's my heart—I'm all heart, my most intimate friends say. The least shock sets it jumping up and down so violently that I have to keep my mouth shut for fear it should fairly leap outside and shock some one else. Nothing but my favorite drops saved me this time. I'm terribly ashamed, but really I couldn't help it. I beg your pardon, I'm sure—There! I'm myself again!"

In amazement Medea stared at the strange creature, rather more than half-inclined to deem him a lunatic, as he nervously hopped about before her. Nor was she less astonished at the sudden and complete change which came over him as he uttered the last sentence.

As though by magic, all traces of nervousness vanished. His quivering members became still, his crimson countenance resumed its normal color, and his voice sounded clear and distinct. From a dancing dervish, he became a calm, suave gentleman, so far as outward seeming went, at least.

"I am an unfortunate man, Miss Pennington," he said, his tones grave, his round countenance taking on an earnest look. "I am the victim of a most peculiar and mysterious malady, liable to be taken as you unluckily witnessed just now, at any hour of the day. It comes over me with the rapidity of the lightning's stroke, giving no warning by which it can be foretold. It is a disease beyond the arts of physicians to cure, though I carry an alleviative in this little vial."

"No apology is necessary, sir," said Medea, coldly, still unable to control the strange repugnance with which this man had inspired her from the first, though she felt a vague pity for one so strangely afflicted.

"Your pardon once more, Miss Pennington," was the swift response, while the other expression gave way to one of whimsical good-humor. "It is not an agreeable task, this confessing one's misfortunes to a fair young lady, but better so than to rest under the degrading suspicion of drunkenness; and my friends solemnly assure me that when I am suffering from one of my spells they could almost take their oath that I am drunk—they do, on my sacred word of honor! Drunk, ma'am—and me the deadly, uncompromising enemy of all intoxicating liquor, ma'am! Me drunk! when I'd rather die once a day, regular, for a thousand ages, than to even smell of whisky!"

"I do not doubt your assurance in the least, sir. But you mentioned a name, a moment ago, that—"

"Which reminds me," he hastily muttered, opening his tightly-fitting coat and fishing forth a card-case from his vest pocket—not without a good deal of straining and contortions, however. "Rather embarrassing, this self-introduction, I find, but that little imp in rags and dirt ran away before I could do so much as give him my card. Allow me, ma'am!"

Medea accepted the proffered bit of paste-board on which was written, in a round, school-boy hand, the legend,

"PROF. KING SMITH, of Mandan."

"My name, ma'am," said the professor, bowing rapidly, rubbing his stumpy hands together. "And your humble servant to command, ma'am."

Still perplexed, Medea glanced from the card to the visitor.

"I hardly understand how you could know anything of my connection with my—with the owner of the name you recently mentioned. I never met you—never heard of you before."

"The loss is mine, ma'am," with another low bow; but the professor straightened up again and his manner underwent another sudden change.

From obsequious politeness, he became blunt and short-speaking, the words dropping from his lips almost like bullets.

"I'm a man of business, ma'am. I was on the train which brought you to Bismarck. I saw that ungodly bully, Curly Kaine, the King of Bismarck, as he boastingly calls himself, persecuting you, and I was just hastening to your defense, when one of those in—I should say, unfortunate spells overpowered me."

"When I recovered, you were talking with a certain person who is known here as Monte James. Without intending to listen to a private conversation—if such it may be termed, taking place in a public coach—I overheard you asking him about a certain person called Lloyd Pennington—"

"Do you know any person by that name?" asked Medea.

"I did, once—long years ago."

"And now? Is he still living? Or is he—dead?"

"Still living—worse luck!" was the sharp response.

"May I ask what you mean by that ejaculation, sir?"

The flabby lips parted as though to utter a hasty reply to this rather imperious demand; but then they closed again without a sound escaping their screwed-up portals, while the rosy face grew flaming red, and the pig eyes protruded more than ordinary.

Professor King Smith hastily snatched out a handkerchief, and clasping both hands over his pug nose, blew a blast that was almost loud enough to rouse the seven sleepers, then nodded rapidly as he returned the useful article to his tail pocket, an ugly chuckle gurgling up in his throat.

"Fooled it that time, anyhow! Beg pardon, ma'am, but I felt as though one of my unfortunate attacks was coming on, and I resolved to smother it in its birth, if it blew my head off!"

"Now to business once more. You were pleased to ask?"

"What you meant by adding the words 'worse luck' to your declaration that Lloyd Pennington still lived?"

"I am bound to answer, of course, but, first, one word: If this man is a particular friend of yours, Miss Pennington—if he is or was once dear to your heart—the only answer I can give will shock you dreadfully."

Medea turned a trifle paler, impressed even against her will by the grave earnestness with which these words were spoken; but her weakness was of brief duration, and her voice rung out clear and steady when she spoke again:

"If it is the truth, I can bear the worst. You have said too much not to be more explicit. I have a right to hear all, yet I ask it of you as a favor; what have you to tell me about the man I once knew as Lloyd Pennington?"

"May I ask your object in seeking this man?"

"You may not," was the firm response. "I did not seek this interview. You came here of your own accord, and when I was about to leave you, you called me back by pronouncing that name. You must have come with the intention of telling me something concerning him. Now you must do so."

"I will," was the sharp, bitter response. "I said worse luck, because I hate him for the terrible wrong he once did my only sister—because I could wring his heart dry of its best blood, drop by drop, if I only had him in my power!"

Seeming to choke with the intensity of his passion, he caught convulsively at his throat. Then he gratefully added:

"Only for her, I would have killed him like a mad-dog!"

"Yet you come here and ask me to believe all you may say against him—you, who hate him so intensely that the mere mention of his name almost throws you into convulsions!" cried Medea, her eyes flashing, her lips curling.

Instantly all signs of emotion vanished from the face of the professor, and once more he seemed the cool, sharp-witted man of business as he confronted the proud beauty.

"Not so, Miss Pennington. I did not come here to denounce Lloyd Pennington, because my lips are forever sealed on the subject of his crimes."

"You speak in enigmas, man!" impatiently cried the young lady. "If you have only such vague and unsatisfactory hints to give out, why did you come here? Why did you seek me out? What is your object in asking for an interview with me?"

"Not because I wished it on my own account, Miss Pennington, charming though you are," was the cold response. "I am under orders, and when I was bidden I felt compelled to come."

But not to tell you the black story of the past. My lips are forever under seal so far as that is concerned."

"Under orders?" echoed Medea. "Then some other person bade you come here and seek me out?"

The professor bowed in silence.

"Are you also sworn to secrecy on that point?" with a cutting sneer. "Does the mystery cover this master of yours also?"

"Mistress, not master," coldly replied the professor, with a bow of correction to the young lady who stood so proudly before him in her almost regal beauty. "I come from my sister."

"And her interest in the case?"

"Not much, though you may find it sufficient to excuse my intrusion. She is the wife of the man you are hunting."

Medea Pennington started back with a low cry.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROFESSOR BLUFFS AND IS BLUFFED.

"His wife! The wife of Lloyd Pennington?"

"Yes; and I repeat it, *worse luck*," emphatically uttered Professor King Smith, riveting his little pig-eyes on the pale, startled countenance of the young lady, who seemed partially stunned by his recent disclosure.

What was her portion of the secret—of the mystery which seemed to inwrap this man who was called Lloyd Pennington? What was her object in seeking him so earnestly? Doubtless a friendly one, since she was so swift to defend his name when attacked, but what was the precise nature of the connection between them?

Such were the questions that flashed across the busy brain of the professor as he stood gazing keenly upon the young lady, waiting for her to recover from the shock which his abrupt speech had given her.

"Married! A wife—and living! I never dreamed of that!"

Mechanically the broken sentences dropped from her lips. Her eyes drooped before that steady gaze, her countenance became deeply suffused, her fingers twined together with a degree of nervousness and indecision such as she had not displayed before since that peculiar interview opened.

The little eyes of the professor began to protrude and to sparkle with a sudden access of light, for he began to believe he had caught the clue he desired to find.

"My dear young lady," he said, in his most unctuous voice, as he drew nearer to Medea, his stumpy hands reaching out to clasp hers. "Do not give way to grief—do not suffer your gentle soul to be crushed into the mire of utter despondency by the discovery of this man's shameful treachery. This man, did I say? Rather this demon in the guise of a human being!"

As his hands touched hers, Medea Pennington gave a little cry of shivering disgust, started back with a regal haughtiness in tone and look that came so unexpectedly as to almost cast the dumpy professor into another spasm.

"How dare you, sir? Oblige me by keeping your distance. Make another attempt to touch my hand, and our interview is at an end forever."

"Your pardon—most humbly I beg your pardon, ma'am," he gurgled, bowing low, his hands tumbling over and over each other. "I meant no harm, intended no insult, I assure you, ma'am; just the contrary, believe me. I merely wished to express my heartfelt sympathy after a fatherly fashion, for that organ, ma'am, gave a mighty bound and a sympathetic throb as it beheld—figuratively speaking, of course, my dear lady—your proud head bowed down with grief at the terrible discovery that the cruel demon whom you seek has another wife, whose prior claim—Ahem! If she hasn't gone crazy, I'm a howling liar, right from headquarters!"

As the final sentence burst from his lips in a ludicrous sort of an aside, Professor King Smith jumped back with a haste that came near landing him on his beam-ends, his pop eyes protruding, his face turning crimson, his flabby lips working like the pendulous muzzle of a wearied horse. For, instead of sinking upon his manly bosom in an excess of grief, the icy barriers giving way before his honest sympathy, so touchingly expressed, Medea Pennington burst into a fit of merry laughter, despite her utmost efforts to the contrary.

Noting his thorough discomfiture, and really fearing he would be cast into another of those curious spasms, Medea controlled her risibles by a desperate effort, saying:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Smith, for my ill-timed explosion, but I really could not help it. Your words and looks—"

"No apologies, ma'am, are necessary," stiffly interposed the dumpy little professor, injured dignity showing in every word and look. "No doubt I gave you ample cause for merriment by my uncouth endeavors to express my sympathy for the devilish duplicity which that demon has—"

"One moment, sir," she interposed, checking

his further speech by an imperious wave of her white hand. "If I comprehend your meaning, you are sadly deceiving yourself. Without further preamble, will you tell me just what you fancy I am to Lloyd Pennington?"

"It is easier to say what you are *not*," a little stiffly. "As I had the honor to inform you, my sister is his wife. As the ceremony which united them took place years ago—when you could have been nothing more than a child—you must see that she has a prior claim; that she is his wife, while you are not."

"My dear sir, have I advanced any such claim?"

"But I inferred—"

"That I was seeking for a man who first deceived, then deserted me—precisely. It was that extreme liveliness of imagination on your part, coupled with the fact that I had not given you the slightest cause for thinking such a thing, that made me burst out laughing."

"Then what in—why are you so eager to find this Lloyd Pennington?" almost snarled the professor.

"When I can recognize your right to ask that question, I will answer you; not before," was the cold response. "You sought this interview, not I. I am ready to listen to what you may have to say, but beyond the simple fact that I am very anxious to find Lloyd Pennington, if still in the land of the living, and am willing to pay any reasonable reward to the one who can bring us face to face, I have nothing to divulge. If you are willing to speak out plainly on these terms, do so. If not, I must beg of you to excuse my remaining any longer."

"Very well, ma'am. I was afraid of causing you pain, and under that dread, I have bungled, I suppose. But now I'll be my usual self—a business man, pure and simple."

"As I had the honor to inform you, I overheard your conversation with Monte Jim on the train. The mention of that name deeply interested me, as you may imagine, and instead of continuing my journey home where loved ones were impatiently awaiting my arrival, I stopped off here, and at once communicated with my sister, spurred thereto by accidentally overhearing a conversation between your cousin and his friend, Mr. Frank Lisle, which touched on the same subject."

"I told my sister all I had heard, and she, thinking her evil husband meant you some mischief, made me promise to seek you out and place you on your guard against him and his dangerous arts. I was highly unwilling to mix in the affair, more especially as she still held me to my old oath to take no positive steps against Lloyd Pennington to avenge her wrongs, but in the end I yielded, and here I am."

He paused to catch his breath, gazing fixedly into the pale, composed countenance of Medea Pennington, as though expecting some comment from her lips. Then, as none came, he added, hurriedly:

"She bade me tell you this much, and to add: Tell her to cease hunting for Lloyd Pennington, unless she wishes misfortune to fall upon her head as heavily as it has descended on mine! Bid her return to her home, and forget that such a demon in human shape ever drew the breath of life!"

"I will never do that, while I live, or until I am fully assured that Lloyd Pennington is dead and in the grave. I have taken a solemn oath to find him and make full restitution for the past—to lift a cruel stain from his name which it has borne unjustly for many long years. This I have sworn, and I will make my oath good, if the performance lies within the scope of mortal power!"

A harsh, unpleasant laugh broke from the flabby lips.

"What does one stain more or less matter? Even if you erase that one, ten thousand equally as black will remain."

"Possibly. You may be speaking the truth, or you may be falsifying, for aught I can tell—"

"Do you wish me to make oath to my words?"

"No; I have neither the right nor the desire to ask anything of the sort. Nor do I mean any offense by what I say. You must bear in mind that you are an entire stranger to me, and of course I can know nothing concerning your honesty or truthfulness. But you declare yourself the deadly enemy of Lloyd Pennington, and that is equivalent to admitting that you would not paint his character any lighter than you can help. Possibly you exaggerate its darkness."

"That would be impossible!" sneered the professor.

"Let it go at that, then," was the cold response. "Tell me the name Lloyd Pennington now bears, if not that which rightfully belongs to him. Tell me where and how I may find him; then name your price, and it shall be paid, if it is not wholly beyond the bounds of reason."

"I warn you, for the last time—"

"And once for all I say: your warnings are worse than useless. I must and will find Lloyd Pennington!"

"Then put on your wraps and come with me. You shall learn for yourself what manner of person you are seeking."

"Go with you—where?"

"To the home of my sister."

Medea started, gazing fixedly into the face of the fat professor, a sudden suspicion seizing upon her mind.

Something told her that there was a cunning snare concealed beneath this blunt proposal; that all along this man had been playing a part; but for what? What ends could he hope to serve by decoying her away from the hotel? In whose interests could he be working, if her suspicions were true, for surely it could not be wholly on his own account?

Keenly, if covertly, Professor King Smith watched the workings of her mobile countenance, reading her doubts and suspicions almost as readily as though they had been impressed there in visible letters.

An amused smile came over his face as he spoke:

"May I ask what grounds you have for thus doubting me?"

Medea started, being taken by surprise at having her inmost thoughts thus readily interpreted, but then her cool wit rallied, and her reply came prompt and unmistakable:

"You say you hate Lloyd Pennington. Hating him, you would not like good fortune to overtake him. I have said that I am trying to bring this to him—to find and make restitution of what he was robbed of in the days gone by—to lift a black cloud from his name. You have repeatedly warned me to give up the search and cease my efforts to discover him. I believe that, failing in convincing me, you mean to try other means of foiling my purpose."

"That I mean to take you prisoner and keep you thus, until death puts an unsurmountable barrier between you and the object of your quixotic quest?" laughed the professor. "My dear Miss Pennington, what a frightful ogre you must believe me! Really, I feel most highly complimented!"

Her face flushed hotly, as his mocking laugh gurgled out of his fat throat, for, now that it was put into plain words, she could not avoid realizing how far-fetched was her idea.

"If my suspicions wronged you, I ask your pardon," she said, frankly, adding in a milder tone: "You can give me the information I seek. Why will you not do so? What necessity is there for me to seek out your sister?"

"Simply because that is her will, and mine as well, if you still refuse to let the dead past rest in its grave."

"I have already answered that part of the matter."

"Very well. Then there is only the one alternative. If you are determined to know all, you must call on my sister. I have said all I intend saying. My lips are forever sealed, by an oath to the full as sacred as the one you plead as an excuse for not retreating from your search for Lloyd Pennington. If you will come with me, all right. If not, I wash my hands of the whole affair, and will start for Mandan in the morning. Please give me your decision, my dear young lady."

"Where is your sister?"

"At home, waiting for my return with or without you."

"You know what I mean," impatiently.

"Where does she live? How far from here? In town, or elsewhere?"

"In town, and only a few moments' walk from this place."

For a few moments Medea stood in a reflective attitude, seeing to deliberately weigh the pros and cons; then her head lifted and her voice came clear and decisive:

"I will go with you on one condition."

"And that condition?"

"That my cousin bears me company."

"Good-evening, Miss Pennington," coldly uttered the professor, bowing low and starting toward the door.

"Stop!" cried Medea, swiftly moving between him and the door. "What do you mean by that?"

"To bid you good-evening, since you absolutely decline my offer. Possibly you may find some other person who can place you on the track of Lloyd Pennington. If not, blame yourself, not me or mine. Once more, good-evening."

"Not yet!" and the young woman, pale but with glowing eyes, placed herself with back against the door, confronting the man with desperate resolution. "You do not leave this room until we have arrived at some sort of an understanding. If you mean honestly by me, why are you so strongly opposed to permitting my cousin to bear us company to the house where you say your sister, the lawful wife of Lloyd Pennington, is awaiting your return?"

A harsh, bitter laugh escaped the man, his fishy eyes filling with a reddish light, his flabby lips contracting until they revealed his yellowish teeth and pale gums.

"You demand my reasons for not accepting the company of your cousin, Alva Pennington? Well, since it is a lady who asks me the question, I will reply, and frankly:

"My lips are forever sealed concerning the past, as I had the honor of saying before; but if they were not, I would sew them up with a red-hot wire before I would do anything to publish her and my shame to the world! As a lady, we can

trust you, when once your solemn word is pledged. But your cousin—he is a drunkard, a gambler, a babbling fool! Let him give a thousand pledges, and before a week could pass, he would break them every one! No; either you go with me alone, or you go not at all. Take your choice. It is my final offer."

Once more Medea hesitated, but not for long. Turning the key in the lock and then withdrawing it, she passed over to a side door which opened into the office, where she beheld the landlord sleepily puffing away at a huge pipe.

The noise attracted his attention and at a signal from the white hand, he dropped his pipe and came forward.

Medea stepped aside to permit his entrance, then closed the door behind him before she spoke.

"Are you acquainted with this gentleman?" she asked, indicating the professor by a wave of the hand.

"Waal, kinder so-so," was the deliberate response.

"What manner of person is he? What sort of reputation does he bear? Can one place any dependence in what he says?"

"I never knowed any partic'lar harm come of him. An' I guess he kin tell the truth without strainin' to hurt, unless it's in a game o' keerds. But we all do it then, ef we kin."

"He says his name is Professor King Smith, of Mandan."

"I never hearn him called only Fatty Smith. An' pefessor, too? Waal, I don't know what of, unless it's keerds!"

The landlord laughed softly, nodding his shaggy head in full appreciation of his own wit, while the professor scowled.

"Thank you, Mr. Dickson," and Medea smiled sweetly. "This gentleman has brought me important information, but as he refuses to tell me all here, insisting on my bearing him company alone to the place where his principal awaits us, I naturally wished to learn whether or no I might trust him. I will go with him, but unless I return here in two hours from now, I beg of you to find my cousin, Alva Pennington, and tell him what has occurred, and with whom I left your house. Will you do this?"

"Sartin! Or I'll go 'long myself—"

"Thanks, but I must go alone, else your kind offer would be most gratefully accepted. Mr. Smith, I will run up-stairs and put on my things. I'll be with you in five minutes."

CHAPTER XIV.

LLOYD PENNINGTON'S WIFE.

"SUPPOSE I don't choose to waste any further time on your fanciful caprices?" surlily uttered the professor, as the young lady turned toward him with her last sentence.

"What do you mean sir?" demanded Medea, her cheeks flushing at this rude address.

"That I have already done more than my contract calls for," was the dogged response. "I came here greatly against my own desires. I anticipated more or less pain in raking open old sores, but *her* wishes, added to a belief that I would be rendering *you* a service, gave me the necessary courage. I felt that you would be grateful in proportion to the sacrifice I was making—not that I looked forward to any pecuniary reward, or anything more substantial than your thanks and warm gratitude; but that much I *did* expect."

"Instead, what has been my reward thus far? Scorn and suspicion, insults without number! You could not have treated me with greater contumely if I bore on my forehead the blazing brand of thief and blackmailer! You might have shown more consideration for a convicted assassin!"

"Miss Pennington, for the last time, I have the honor to bid you a most respectful good-evening!"

He bowed so profoundly that the strain was too great, and with a tearing sound, a button flew off of his tight-fitting coat, the catastrophe causing Professor King Smith to resume his perpendicularly with ludicrous celerity.

Pale and resolute, Medea Pennington confronted him, the key to the door still in her hand. Sharp and distinct sounded her voice, leaving not the slightest room for doubt.

"In plain words, sir, you refuse to fulfill your promise?"

"I did not promise to let you lead me like a thief with a rope around my neck!" was the sullen retort.

"If your motives were honest, you would not look at the simple and ordinary precautions which I have taken, in any such light as that."

Until now, the rather slow-witted landlord had stood in open-mouthed astonishment watching the couple, trying in vain to extract the full meaning from one speech before another fell to confuse him; but now he seemed to strike bottom, and with his sturdy body supported on widely separated feet, he shook one hairy fist beneath the flaming nose of the professor, his voice deep and menacing as he spoke:

"Look yer, Fatty Smith. None o' your pesky shennannigan. You axed this young lady fer to go some'rs with ye. You kep' up a-coaxing ontel she said she'd go. Now you kick over the traces

an' want to back out. That ain't white. You cain't come none o' your monkeyin' over any o' my boarders. Ef the leddy still wants to go, go you've got to, ef I hev to ram you chuck up to the nozzle in a keg of giant powder, p'int you in the kerect direction, an' then tetch the hull business off with that red-hot head-light o' yourn! Now ye got it, *straight!*"

Honest Giles Dickson emphasized his speech with a couple of solemn nods, then drew his sturdy form erect, with a shy glance toward his lady boarder, as though wishing to note the effect produced by his unusual eloquence.

"A thousand thanks, Mr. Dickson!" exclaimed Medea, too polite, even in her present excited state to disappoint the well-meaning fellow. "I know that you would put your threats into execution without a moment's hesitation, but I hardly think Mr. Smith will prove so obstinate."

"But if I still decline your delightful company, on those terms, Miss Pennington?" sneered the professor.

"In that case, I will ask Mr. Dickson to detain you while I bring my cousin and make known to him all that you have told me. He is a partner in my quest, and doubtless will know better how to deal with a man of your description than I do."

For a brief space the professor hesitated, glancing from one to the other, but then came a complete alteration of both tone and manner.

"You shall have your own way in this affair, Miss Pennington, though I still believe you will deeply regret your obstinacy in seeking to discover this man."

"You will take me to the house of your principal?"

"Yes. My refusal but now, was only made in hopes of scaring you from your purpose. I had no other motive."

"Death alone can prevent me from carrying out that purpose!" was the grave response as Medea unlocked the door and hastened up to her chamber.

"Look yer, Fatty Smith," said Honest Giles, blinking like some solemn owl as he stood before the professor, apparently in readiness to intercept him should he attempt to flee. "I don't know what sort o' game it is you're playin', but I do know this much: Ef the young leddy ain't back here inside o' two hours, as she said, I'll take your trail and never stop to sleep or rest onto it ontel I've run it clean down to bed-rock. When I git thar, ef they's any smell o' your fingers in the pie, I'll set down onto ye like the crack o' doom!"

A trifle mixed in the metaphors, perhaps, but none who heard him could doubt the complete earnestness of Honest Giles. What he threatened would be performed.

Professor King Smith only shrugged his fat shoulders, for already the returning footsteps of Medea Pennington were to be heard swiftly flying down the stairs, and with his hat beneath his arm, he opened the door and joined her in the passage, smiling faintly at her words:

"In two hours from now, Mr. Dickson—remember!"

"Or I'll know the reason why!" cried Honest Giles, as she passed on without pausing for a reply.

"As I fear you don't trust me sufficiently to care for the assistance of my arm, Miss Pennington, I will not make the offer," said the professor, as they left the hotel.

"I require no assistance, thank you. I am only anxious to reach the building where you say your sister is waiting for our coming," hurriedly replied the maiden.

"Which you will soon discover is nothing more than the simple truth, doubt me as you may. I have only one request: do not blame me if this visit brings you trouble instead of joy. I have tried my best to dissuade you."

Medea Pennington made no reply. That ground had been gone over so often, that she had nothing further to say.

Also in silence, the fat professor led the way rapidly through the town, choosing the darkest and most deserted ways, as though anxious to avoid all observation.

Medea noticed this fact, but she said nothing, only keeping one hand on the butt of a loaded revolver, with which she had taken the precaution to arm herself, while donning her street-garments. With it she was prepared to defend herself against treachery, should any be intended.

"This is the place!" muttered Smith at last, as they came to a small, one-story building, retired in its location, on the outskirts of Bismarck, not many rods from the river's edge.

He rapped at the door, and the barrier was almost immediately opened, a soft voice demanding:

"Is that you, brother? Has she come?"

"Yes, she is here. Will you enter, Miss Pennington?"

There was no light within the building, but Medea did not hesitate. She had come too far to beat a retreat at this late hour, and still grasping her pistol, she advanced.

A soft hand closed upon her arm, and gently drew her inside, the professor following, shutting the door behind him.

"Wait one moment!" added that musical voice

from the darkness. "I will strike a light and then you can see where you are."

The uncertain flickering of a match was followed by a flood of light from a large oil lamp, and Medea Pennington drew a swift breath of surprise as she glanced around her.

Though small, the apartment was richly, almost gorgeously fitted up, seeming strangely out of place in that then rough, new border town.

The walls and ceiling were hung with rich, cream-colored damask. The floor was covered with a velvet carpet, with pile so soft and thick that one sunk in it as through a layer of luxuriant moss. The furniture—that of a sleeping and sitting-room combined—glittered with gilding and inlaid work, rare and costly. On the walls hung pictures, on hand-carved brackets stood marble statuettes; in one word, everything seemed as rich and costly as money could procure.

Under any different circumstances, Medea's surprise would have been still greater, but now she only took one swift, comprehensive glance at her surroundings, then turned her gaze upon the woman who stood before her, closely scanning her.

And here a still greater surprise awaited the maiden.

She had expected to meet a woman past the prime of her beauty, if not completely broken down by the terrible wrongs she had been called on to endure, according to the tale told by the fat little professor. Instead—

A woman of tall and regal figure, beside whom she—herself above the medium height of the softer sex—appeared to be but a half-grown child. At least six feet in height, and yet with a form so perfectly proportioned in its superb curves and contours, her unusual altitude was only remarked when taken in comparison with another. Her complexion was almost Spanish in its duskiness, yet seemed absolutely without flaw or imperfection—soft, clear, creamy. Her hair was of a lustrous blue-black, so seldom seen in all its perfection; silken instead of the usual coarse texture which goes with this color. It was arranged in a peculiar diadem-shaped *coiffure*, richly sprinkled with gleaming jewels for the most part rubies, gleaming like drops of translucent blood. Around her queenly throat hung a necklace of the same jewels, a diamond-studded cross resting just where her bosom began to swell. Upon her white fingers also shone precious stones, and here and there, as though carelessly dropping, brilliants sparkled in the folds of her sweeping dress, corn-colored satin, heavily draped with black lace.

So brilliant was this unexpected vision, that Medea Pennington was literally dazzled, starting back and raising one hand to shield her eyes, coming as she had from the blackness which reigned outside that cloudy night.

A smile curved the rich, red lips, and a musical voice broke the silence:

"You have nothing to fear from me, Miss Pennington."

"I am not afraid," was the quick response.

"That I can swear to!" broke in the voice of the fat little professor, with a short, disagreeable laugh. "Miss Pennington is proof against any weak sentiment like that, as I can truthfully bear witness. A tiger is a coward beside her!"

"Brother King!" ejaculated the gorgeously-robed woman.

"Sister Helen!" echoed the little professor, his bosom swelling out until it seemed a miracle that his remaining buttons did not fly off like exploding torpedoes. "Allow me to finish, if you please. I believe you sent me to bring this young lady here?"

"Of course I did; and I thank you for having succeeded."

"Well, that's one consolation anyway!" he gurgled, with a mock bow. "Never mind; I'm meek as a lamb. I never complain—I'm not complaining *now*—but I *do* say this: if ever I run another errand for you of this description, I pray that I may trip up on the first step I take and break my neck into ten thousand pieces—so there!"

"Miss Pennington," and he swiftly turned toward her, "I prefer not to remain here during your conversation with my sister. You promised to return to the hotel inside of two hours. I will return in an hour and a half. If I am needed before the expiration of that time, a light shown for an instant through this doorway will suffice. Good-evening, ma'am!"

With a short, stiff bow, he turned and left the house.

A low, musical laugh came from the woman at this abrupt departure, and she said, with a trace of sadness:

"You must pardon him, Miss Pennington, if you find him a trifle unceremonious. He is a dear, good brother, who has suffered much on my account, and it is like poison to him to have the black past referred to in the most remote manner."

She placed a chair for Medea, herself sinking upon a soft couch, very unlike one whose heart was breaking under shameful wrongs. Instead, she looked like a tigress in good-humor; like a modern representation of the voluptuous queen of the Nile.

"Well," she said, abruptly, after a brief but close scrutiny of her fair visitor. "What do you want of me?"

"I should ask you that," retorted Medea, her cheeks flushing a little at this sharp address. "You send for me. I am here in answer to your pressing invitation."

"As you please," was the listless reply. "You wish to discover the present whereabouts of a precious scoundrel who used to call himself Lloyd Pennington?"

Medea bowed coldly. She was rapidly growing to dislike this woman, even more heartily than she did the professor.

"The name is the same as your own; a relative of yours?"

"That is not to the point. Your brother said you could and would tell me where I might find Lloyd Pennington. With that understanding I accompanied him to this place. Will you give me that information? I am ready to pay any reasonable price for it, if reliable."

With a short, metallic laugh, the woman cast a lazy glance around the room that spoke louder than words. She did not seem to feel the need of money to any great extent.

"What are your reasons for seeking Lloyd Pennington?"

"To see that justice is done him—to right a cruel wrong, and brush away a shameful cloud which has long overhung his name," replied Medea, her eyes glowing vividly.

The regal brows contracted, and an unpleasant look came into her face, while those dusky eyes began to glow.

"I was misinformed. If I had known this, I would not have taken the trouble to send for you," she said, coldly.

"But since I have come in answer to your urgent invitation, you surely will not send me away without the desired and promised information?"

"Why not?"—rudely. "I am less interested now. I thought you were another of his victims. I fancied you were hunting him down, to seek revenge. Believing this, I was eager to see you and join my forces to yours. I would have assisted you all that lay in my power; but now—"

"You refuse to speak, then?"—and Medea rose to her feet.

"Stop! Resume your seat," imperiously uttered the woman, with a wave of her jeweled hand. "If you insist, I will tell you all I can. But I warn you that, if you think to do Lloyd Pennington a good service, you will live to regret it!"

"Is that a threat, and from you?" coldly demanded Medea, still standing, her repugnance increasing with the passage of each moment she breathed the same atmosphere with the woman.

"It is a warning!" cried the woman, rising to her feet, her great eyes glowing with what seemed a sudden fury. "A warning which you will do well to heed. Look at me! Am I a woman to be lightly scorned by a man who won my heart's love—who had first taught me the meaning of that word?"

"We were talking of revenge not love," said Medea, coldly returning that fiery gaze—"or, rather, you were speaking of revenge, I of justice."

"You are right, Miss Pennington," said the woman, her wild passion seeming to suddenly cool beneath that steady gaze. "I forget myself whenever I think of or mention the name of that unhung villain, and the thought of your meeting him face to face, in youth and innocence, sent the lava-flood tearing through its barriers. Once more I warn you—nay, I beg of you on my bended knees to give over your search for this demon in human guise, before his ungoverned passions make of you a wreck like the one you now behold!" and she suited the action to her words, sinking upon her knees, her clasped hands raised beseechingly, her eyes moistening with tears.

Slowly Medea shook her head in denial. "I have sworn to find him, and I will keep my oath! Even though I know him as the demon you say, I would not retreat!"

CHAPTER XV.

LLOYD PENNINGTON'S CRIME.

The woman abruptly sprung from her humble position, confronting Medea, her eyes glowing, her cheeks flushed, her voice altered from one of pleading to that of bitter warning.

"If a demon, say you? He is a devil—blacker than the foul fiend himself! He never knew the meaning of the words truth, honor, justice, or mercy. His own pleasure was his only god, and to gratify the merest caprice he would trample your heart beneath his feet in the mire, and only laugh as he listened to your prayers for pity! If a demon, say you? Ah, that little word shows how ignorant you are of the real character of the man you are seeking to find and benefit!"

Even this passionate tirade did not shake Medea's resolution. The words of the little fat professor had prepared her to encounter bitter hatred for Lloyd Pennington, and from the out-

set she was prepared to accept what she should hear with a considerably-sized grain of salt.

"I am not disputing the truth of what you say, madam," the maiden uttered, coldly. "No doubt you have suffered greatly at the hands of Lloyd Pennington; but that fact does not absolve me from my vow. Since it pains you to recall the past as connected with him, why do so? I am not anxious to hear it. It will answer all my wishes if you give me the name under which Lloyd Pennington is now known—if you will tell me where and how I may find him."

With a sweeping stride, the woman paused close before Medea, grasping her wrist, bending her regal head, and gazing intently into the maiden's face with great eyes which seemed almost to scorch, so intently did they glow.

"You are young and lovely—true-hearted and pure!" she murmured, heedless for the time being of the manner in which Medea shrunk away from her, shuddering with a strange repugnance from her burning touch. "I can read your nature as easily as though it were a printed page. Lovely as an angel, and as true and faithful. Tender-hearted, yet strong-nerved and resolute where those you love are concerned, or you fancy the path of duty leads you. Innocent and pure—as yet! But when your present purpose is fulfilled—when you have met that merciless demon face to face—when you have listened to his soft, deep tones, so full of music—when you have felt your poor, silly heart warm and begin to glow beneath the glorious light of his eyes as he pours his sweet but poisonous lies into your eager ears—then what will it be?"

"Ruin and wreck, poor fool! A ruined life and a wrecked heart, silly girl. One more fond soul cast down to hades."

"Oh, child! why will you not listen and take warning by me? I, who was once all that I have pictured you. I, who never knew sorrow, never knew sin, until after I crossed his path! For the last time I warn you. Forget your vow; forget that such a person as Lloyd Pennington ever lived. Go back to your home, and live out the peaceful, contented existence Heaven surely intended for one like you."

Medea freed her arm and drew back a trifle, her brows contracting, her eyes filled with a still deeper determination.

"When I have kept my oath to the dead—not before."

A hard, bitter laugh parted those voluptuous lips, and the woman flung herself upon the couch once more.

"Since you are so bent on self-destruction, why should I trouble myself further in your behalf? I am a fool, and yet—if I could rob him of one victim, it would be ample reward. I will! Listen, Miss Pennington, while I tell you my story. It will enable you to judge better the nature of the demon you have sworn to find."

"I do not ask this—I would rather not hear it," hurriedly interposed Medea, shrinking a little.

"And why?"

The woman's shrillings was gone, and she sat down, calmly and deliberately, and pointed: "If you are so terribly bitter against Lloyd Pennington, you are not capable of doing him simple justice. You might try to speak nothing save the truth, but your hatred would cause you to exaggerate his faults."

A hard, scornful laugh cut the speech short. "In plain words, I would like to see you, if you would be on the side of mercy, for mortal sin, you could not picture the utter depravity of that demon!"

"Then why make the attempt? It can do no good, so far as shaking my determination is concerned. Were he twice the miracle of evil you say, I would still seek him out in fulfillment of my vow. Tell me his name—tell me where to find him—and I will trouble you no more."

"You must listen. I must tell all, now, or suffocate! Then if you still wish to find Lloyd Pennington, I will tell you the name by which he is now known, and where to find him."

"If nothing else will content you, go on. I listen," said Medea, coldly, sinking into a chair and folding her hands on her lap, pale and composed, but watching the woman closely.

The woman turned her head so that the light fell less fully upon her face, then, with half-closed eyes, and in a low, tremulous tone, she began her recital:

"It was nearly ten years ago that I first met the man who called himself Lloyd Pennington. Just where, does not matter now. If you care for more minute details, after I am through, you shall have them."

"There were only us four in the family; father, mother, brother King and myself. We were happy and contented, for we had a beautiful home and wealth sufficient to gratify our most extravagant desires, and not a family in the State ranked higher in popular estimation."

"I was more than ordinarily beautiful, then; it would be mere affectation to deny that, when the ruins are before you, still passable, despite all that I have undergone."

She paused and her eyes opened a little as

they turned toward Medea, as though for a confirmation of her words, but the maiden simply bowed slightly.

"I do not say it in boasting. I cared little for beauty, then, and still less for admiration. I was a home-body, happy in our pleasant little circle, and I seldom went out into society. I had an aim in life, though I kept it close secret from all. I was studying to prepare myself for the stage, although I knew that my relatives would never give their consent to my becoming an actress, dearly as they loved me, great as was their indulgence."

"It was then that Lloyd Pennington came. My parents did not greatly fancy him, but almost at the outset he surprised my precious secret, and by pretending to enter fully into my wild dreams, by carefully nourishing them, he quickly won my entire confidence, then my love, which until then had slumbered so soundly that I never dreamed how intensely passionate my nature really was—how intense my capacity for adoration."

"The serpent charmed never so wisely. He played his part so cunningly that I never once suspected the truth until it was forever too late. I thought him an enthusiast, like myself, looking forward to the same goal, and I believed that this similarity of purpose, this secret longing for fame, the real tie which connected us and made me look and long so hungrily for his coming."

"For he lied to me, even at that early stage of the game. He pretended that it was this passion of his for the drama that made him disliked by my relatives, and that stern measures would be taken to keep us apart if our intimacy became so much as suspected, lest his wild visions should be communicated to me. I believed him; and then, urged by him, I took my second step on the dark road to destruction."

"He introduced me to a lady—his sister, he told me at the time, though after events proved him an infamous liar in this respect as in all others. At her house we met often to study the old masters of speech, as I fancied; in reality for him to weave, and I to be entranced in the meshes of love."

"His pretended sister played her part well, and when the scales partially dropped from my eyes, it was not a difficult matter for them to win my consent to marry him, the one man of all men in my estimation."

"The ceremony was strictly private, but it was a legal one—Lloyd Pennington took precious good care that there should be no omissions, no flaws in that!"

"For one short week I dwelt in Heaven! Nothing milder can approach my rapture, and even those words are too tame—far too tame to shadow forth my exquisite bliss!"

"It was only to make my punishment greater when the lightning-stroke fell and awakened me from my dream-life in fool's paradise!"

"Unknown to me, Lloyd Pennington wrote to my father, and sent him a copy of our marriage-certificate, giving him an address to which an answer might be directed, but no other clew to our place of hiding. The answer came promptly, and brought with it my awakening from that fond dream. For it simply contained a father's curse on the head of an ungrateful child."

"We were together when the letter arrived, and I never suspected aught until a frightful storm of curses burst from the lips of my husband—curses upon his own folly, upon the gray hair of my father—curses for me, since now I was a beggar, instead of the heiress he had been led to believe me!"

"That was my awakening, and I thought life could contain nothing so bitter, so cruel, so heart-crushing. Silly fool! the time was near at hand when I learned to look back upon that as no more than a single drop in the ocean of despair!"

"The shock was so terrible, that I must have fainted, for the next I can remember is finding him kneeling beside me, pleading for forgiveness in the tender, passionate tones I know so well and loved so dearly. I was a woman, and I granted the pardon he prayed for. I allowed him to soothe my wounded feelings, to explain away his mad rage—he was my husband, and I loved him with all my soul!"

"He was all remorse, you see. His anger had been all for me, none for himself. The loss of my fortune affected him only as it concerned my future comfort. So he said, and so I was but too anxious to believe."

"While in his presence, I did not miss my relatives and their love so very much. When he was away, then the tears came in torrents and I fully realized the frightful loss I had suffered. Not the money. I gave that barely a thought, for I believed my husband was rich enough to keep the grisly wolf from our door. Then, too, I had faith that time would soften the hearts of my parents, and bring us together once more."

"That day never came, though, in secret, I tried to bring about a reconciliation. I wrote to father, telling him how true and noble was my husband, how happy he made my life, over which hung but the one cloud—the alienation of my kindred."

"Never mind what I wrote. Enough that I poured out my whole soul, and long ere the end was reached, the pages were wet with my tears.

"Secretly I posted my letter—my appeal—and with emotions which nearly suffocated me, forced as I was to keep them concealed beneath a mask of gayety while in the presence of my husband, I waited for the reply, hoping against hope.

"After a long and painful delay, it came, and with hands that trembled so I was forced to pause more than once, I tore it open and read what cut me to the very heart.

"It was from my father, but he addressed me by my married name, not as his child. He said that he had tried to forgive my treachery and take me back to my old place in his heart, but without success. Since I had chosen another before them, I must be content. And yet, beyond this one punishment, I should not be permitted to suffer. He had made a will in place of that which he had destroyed in the first outburst of anger when he learned of my desertion, restoring me to my former place as equal sharer with my brother in his wealth; but this I was to forfeit in case I attempted in any way to intrude upon them while living. When he died, I might come to see him, not before.

"My husband found me lying senseless on the floor, when he came home, that cruel letter by my side. He restored me to consciousness, but when I had told him the contents of that letter, he refused to listen. He threw it into the fire, as unworthy either writer or recipient. I did not know, then, that he had read every line over and over, while I lay at his feet like one dead, before he sought to restore my consciousness, and that all this indignation was but a sham.

"That same night my parents' house was entered and robbed, my father murdered in cold blood! Not the faintest clew was left by which to trace the author or authors of the double—nay, triple crime; for when she beheld the bloody corpse of her murdered husband, my poor mother swooned over it, and passed from one terrible spasm into another, until death came to her relief before the sun reached its meridian!

"As I said, there was not the slightest clew left by which the criminal could be traced. Detectives prowled around like bloodhounds, seeking to earn the great reward which my brother offered, but they were all baffled.

"During that awful period, my husband was very kind and tender to me. Only for his constant presence, but for his assiduous care and gentle nursing, I believe I would have been in fit condition to share the double grave into which my poor parents were placed.

"You see, I give the man in whom you feel such an overwhelming interest, all the credit his conduct deserves," said the woman, with a hard, metallic laugh, glancing toward Medea Pennington, whose face showed pale as that of a corpse.

At the outset, she had firmly resolved not to allow her better and cooler judgment to be carried away by the story this strange woman insisted on telling. She who hated Lloyd Pennington so intensely, could not do him justice. Even should she try to be perfectly honest, her story must be prejudiced.

And yet, as she listened to the rapidly uttered sentences—so full of passion, pathos and a frightful cynicism, all commingled—Medea could not help feeling that Lloyd Pennington must be a criminal of the deepest dye. She could not help divining the final charge to which this woman was leading up with real dramatic power, desperately though she fought against the conviction of its truth.

"I was notified of the time set for the double funeral," resumed the woman, speaking rapidly, as though anxious to complete a painful task which she would not shirk; "but I was then lying at the point of death, and even that consolation—the gazing once more upon their loved faces on earth—was denied to me. They were buried, and I in ignorance of the death of my mother.

"The lawyer who had charge of the will, was instructed not to open it, without my being present, with my husband, so that ceremony was delayed until my bodily powers were sufficiently restored to permit my attending.

"My husband bore me company. My brother coldly acknowledged my salutation, but refused to accept my hand. As for my husband, he was utterly ignored.

"The will was read, and found to be in perfect accordance with the terms mentioned in my father's letter to me; his property was divided equally between myself and brother.

"But scarcely had the lawyer concluded reading, when the door opened and a little dried-up old man entered; the bosom friend of my father, a retired lawyer. In his peculiar tones, he begged the attention of all present, opening a document which presented outwardly the same appearance as the one just read—but oh! how different in contents!

"It was a will, dated one day later than the other, and in it my father gave all his property

to his son, cutting me off with a single cent, as a reward for my disobedience!

"I was looking at my husband, and in his face I read the horrible truth—to my terrified gaze, he stood self-convicted—the assassin of my father!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN'S FIGHT FOR HONOR.

Even though she had been gradually led up to anticipate this terrible charge against Lloyd Pennington, Medea uttered a faint cry of shuddering denial when those words—hot and venomously issuing through those red lips and pearly teeth—came from the woman who claimed to have been lawfully wedded to him, years ago.

A sneering, disagreeable laugh was the manner in which her agitation was received.

"If you are thus terribly shocked by the mere recital of what occurred years ago, what think you were my emotions when I read the crimson truth imprinted upon the face of the man for love of whom I had sacrificed everything else which a woman holds dear? When I knew that the man I called my husband was the murderer of my father and my mother?"

"But you did not know," faltered Medea, shuddering. "It was only a suspicion—only a hideous phantasy born of your unsettled brain! You had no foundation for such a monstrous idea, and none save an insane person could even have conceived such a frightful conceit!"

"Bah!" bitterly uttered the woman, sitting up, her dusky brows contracting, her black eyes glittering vividly. "If the words had been printed in letters of fire across his forehead, I could not have read them more distinctly. Only for an instant did he suffer the cunning mask to drop, taken so completely by surprise, but it was long enough for me to read the soul-crushing truth—to know that my husband was the foul assassin of my poor parents!

"That much I saw, then, with a wild and agonizing wail, I fell headlong to the floor, senseless.

"It was long weeks before I came back to life and consciousness again, and it was still longer before I was strong enough to hear just what had occurred while I lay in that death-like state of stupor; but I will tell it in the order of happening, so you can follow the dark trail without becoming confused by its windings and turnings.

"It chanced that I alone caught that frightful look which came into the face of my husband, for all, even my brother, were astounded by the production of the second will, and had eyes only for the little old lawyer.

"My fainting was attributed to the shock of finding myself disinherited, instead of the rich heiress I had been led to believe, and after I was borne out of the room and placed in charge of the servants, the reading of the will was completed by my dead father's old friend.

"I was left a single penny, as I told you, the entire property being bequeathed to my brother. Then followed his reasons for disinheriting me in reality, while still leaving the impression that I was to share equally in his estate.

"He knew that Lloyd Pennington married me for the fortune which was reputed in store for me, and he resolved to punish us both to the utmost extent in his power. For this reason he had written to me that I was restored to my original place in his will; for that reason he kept his lawyer in ignorance of the fact that he had made another testament, one day later than that which was placed in his care.

"His old friend was to watch for the reading of the will, and when it was completed, he was to produce that which set it aside, and left me a pauper. It was a bitter revenge, but I will not say that it was unjust.

"Better for me a thousand times had I never recovered my senses after that horrible discovery of my husband's crime at the reading of the will; but my punishment was not yet complete, and I came back to life, to consciousness.

"Almost my first conscious thought was of the discovery I had made; but when I recognized the handsome face of my husband dropping over me—when I felt his hot tears dripping upon my face, and heard his broken prayers of thankfulness for my restoration to him—I fought against that frightful conviction, until I had crushed it down, as I then believed, forever.

"It was too terrible to be true, so I told myself. He could not be guilty of such a deed. He was too good, too pure, and loved me too dearly to injure those in whose veins flowed blood kindred to my own. It was but the wild fancy of a diseased brain, without the slightest foundation in truth. So I argued with myself in secret, and so I at length came to believe. Such was my monstrous infatuation for the foul criminal whom I called my husband and hugged to my bosom.

"But it seems that I was not the only one who had suspected Lloyd Pennington of the bloody deed, and though no positive clew could be obtained, no proof of his actual guilt be discovered, the cautious researches being made by the bloodhounds of the law, so disquieted him,

that he took me and left my native place, not pausing until he had placed a crooked and tangled trail behind him.

"Then I began to see him in his true colors. He urged me to come out on the stage, but I could not gratify him in this. I found that my memory was destroyed, that not one line of all those parts over which I used to pore by the day at a time, could I recall, even after his repeated promptings. I tried my best to please him, but all in vain, and in the end he had to give over the idea of my making a living for us both.

"He took to gambling, or returned to it, as I now know. He would remain out late of nights and then return drunk. He was cross and peevish, and at times treated me with cruelty such as I never dreamed he could exhibit, least of all toward me, whom he had so frequently sworn was dearer far to him than life itself.

"Nor was this the worst. That I could and did freely forgive him, for I felt that I had become a clog which prevented him from climbing to a greater height. But there was a still more bitter blow in store for me.

"My husband began to talk strangely—so strangely that instead of trying to comprehend his meaning, I fought against doing so, mind and soul. But it was in vain. The more I struggled to disbelieve, the plainer grew his words, until, at last, even I could no longer doubt.

"I will not insult your innocent ears by repeating his vile speech, word for word. Enough that he introduced me to a number of his rich, profligate associates, and bade me treat them with complaisance—to accept whatever they might offer me in the way of money or presents no matter the price I had to pay for such favors. Money he must have, and I must help him earn it; if not in one way, then in another.

"For the first time since our marriage, I resisted him. I forgot my timidity in my indignation, and we quarreled most bitterly. He saw that I was not to be shaken in my determination, and to recover the ground he had lost, he played a most cunning part. He pretended to be drunk, and seemingly by accident, he let it escape him that he had spoken thus to test my fidelity, against which some of his dissolute comrades had cast out vague hints.

"It was a shallow ruse, and never could have deceived me, had my love for him been less great, or my brain as clear as in the days before sorrow clouded it. As it was, like a fool, I fell into the trap, and believed all he wished.

"He dropped into what seemed a drunken stupor, and I spent the rest of the night watching over him. In the morning he was his usual self, and believing that he could not remember anything which he had uttered while drunk, I never alluded to the matter.

"A week later he brought my brother to me, saying that he had sought him out and obtained a reconciliation in hopes of restoring light to my clouded heart. It seemed like a glimpse of heaven to me after all I had undergone, and for a month I was supremely happy; but it was only a lull before the storm.

"By accident I overheard my husband and his most intimate friend plotting the ruin of my brother. I could not doubt their earnestness, for neither showed the slightest trace of intoxication, and their cunning plot was carefully elaborated. Stunned, I listened; then stole away and warned my brother, bidding him flee while he could.

"He begged me to bear him company, but I refused. My place was with my husband, I told him; and all he could say was powerless to move me. Then he refused to go, but at length I persuaded him, by promising to follow if Lloyd Pennington continued in his downward path.

"It was late at night before I saw my husband again, and then, though I could see that he had been drinking heavily, he was still master of his actions, so great was his rage. He asked me if I knew what had become of my brother, who had failed to keep an appointment made for that evening. I replied that he had left the city, after bidding me a hasty good-by, but that I knew nothing of whither he had gone.

"My trembling voice betrayed me, and his suspicions were awakened. Sternly he questioned me, and in the end learned all that I had done. Then his rage was frightful, and I believed he would murder me before he had done. As it was, for the first time in my life I felt the cruel force of a man's hand, and only when I lay bleeding and gasping at his feet, did the brute whom I called husband cease beating me.

"In the morning I was unable to rise from my bed, and I heard him turn the key in the lock as he left the room. I lay there so full of wretchedness and woe, that I prayed for the angel of death to come to my release.

"Instead, it was my brother who came, some time in the afternoon. As well as I could through my sobs and tears, I told him how I had been treated. In his just indignation, he vowed that he would seek the monster out and shoot him down like a dog; but I persuaded

him not, and after some more earnest conversation through the barred door, he left me alone.

"It was nearly midnight when the outer door opened, and I heard a footstep on the stairs, then a key turn in my chamber-door, which opened to admit—not my husband, but the villain whom I had overheard plotting the ruin of my brother with Lloyd Pennington!

"I was dressed, and sitting beside a table, but I leaped to my feet with a little cry of wonder as I recognized the bold intruder on my privacy. I naturally expected my husband to follow him, but instead, the scoundrel closed the door, turned the key in the lock, then withdrew it as he faced me, an unholy smile lighting his liquor-inflamed countenance.

"I demanded the meaning of this strange conduct, waving him back as he approached. He paused, but it was with the insolent assurance of one who feels that he is complete master of the situation, and able to abide his time.

"There is no necessity for repeating, word for word all that he said, though I could do so, for every syllable is written upon my heart in letters of fire. Enough that he informed me I was now his property; that I had been duly bought and sold; that my husband, wearying of my constant tears and reproaches, had, against a large sum of money, wagered the key of my chamber, and all the treasures which it was capable of unlocking. The game was played and my husband lost. He gave up the key, and the fortunate winner had hastened to reap his reward.

"This the shameless villain told me, swaying to and fro, as though too far gone in drink to stand steadily; and he would have spoken still plainer, had I not checked him in my honest indignation. What I said, I cannot recall at present, nor is it necessary that I should. Enough that I did not spare either him or my husband.

"When my breath failed me, and I paused, a complete and startling change came over the villain, and his bearing was now that of a complete sober man.

"He said that his story of the manner in which he gained possession of the key was a lie, in which he had been coached by Lloyd Pennington, who was determined to get rid of me, once for all, as he wished to marry a rich heiress whom he had long been courting as a single man. He sent this rascal to my chamber, and was to follow after him, in an hour or so, with a number of witnesses, who were to swear to finding me in his company, and through that means enable Lloyd Pennington to secure a divorce.

"Stunned by the frightful duplicity of the man I had so passionately loved, I listened, like one in a dream, while he made this revelation. My quietude was misunderstood by the brutal rascal, and it gave him renewed courage.

"If I would yield and grant him the reward he sought, at some future time, he said he would beat a retreat and tell my husband that I had firmly repulsed him, causing him to flee precipitately in order to preserve his life.

"I had parted my lips to indignantly repulse him and his vile proposition, when there came a sudden rush of feet along the landing outside my chamber, and the door was burst open, Lloyd Pennington and several of his boon companions rushing headlong into the room.

"As though half-insane with rage, my husband pulled out a pistol and threatened to blow out the brains of the false friend who had dared to steal like a serpent into his house to dishonor it, but his mates caught and disarmed him.

"Then his pretended rage was poured out upon me, charging me with being all that was vile and treacherous, swearing that he would bring me before the bar of justice and strip from me the name which I had so foully dishonored.

"I listened until his breath failed him; then I uttered a single word—the name of my brother—and the door of a closet was flung open, my brother and a detective, both with revolvers drawn, stepped into full view, boldly confronting the astounded plotters who had so cunningly laid their snares in which to entangle me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE SURPRISES THAN ONE.

WITH a painful interest for which she could hardly account, Medea Pennington had listened to the narrative of this strange woman thus far, though with growing uneasiness as she was forced to note the passage of time. More than once she had made an attempt to hasten the conclusion, only to be silenced by an imperious wave of the hand, but now, as the woman paused with a long-drawn breath, she hastily uttered:

"I have no right—no wish to hear all that you may have suffered in the past, madam. I cannot alter my firm resolution to find Lloyd Pennington and perform the sacred duty intrusted to me by one who is now dead. Spare yourself, by telling me where I may find him, since it must be as unpleasant for you to recall as it is for me to listen to this sad recital."

"If I can bear it, you surely ought!"

"But I do not recognize the necessity—"

"I do, then!" cried the woman, rising to a sitting posture, her face deeply flushed, her

great eyes all aglow. "If you are so stubbornly determined to seek out Lloyd Pennington, you will in the end become intimate with him. Stop! I know the man and you do not. I can readily foresee the end. He will take a fancy to your pure, angel type of beauty, the more readily because it is in such complete contrast with his satanic nature. He will lay himself out to win your heart, and he will succeed, even as he succeeded with me. He will try to make you believe him as but little below your pure level, and in the end he will gain all he seeks.

"Some day it may happen that my name may be brought up between you, and as an antidote to the lies which he will most assuredly pour upon my head, I must tell you my side of the story. Not but what, despite all reason, you will end by believing most religiously that I am a female fiend, while he is a martyred demi-god; but for a time, until your subjection to him and his devilish art is complete, you will do me justice. That is worth striving for even if it did not do me good to occasionally recall the black and terrible past."

With a low sigh, Medea sunk back in her chair, realizing the utter uselessness of further protest. The woman laughed shortly, as she noticed this, then said:

"Have a little patience, my dear child, and I will make the remainder of my history as brief as possible.

"I find I have anticipated my story a little, but a few words will suffice to pick up the dropped threads.

"You remember I spoke of my brother's coming to see me, while I was fast locked in my chamber, and after I believed him far away, thanks to my warning him of the dastardly plot which Lloyd Pennington and his boon companion had formed to rob if not murder him.

"I was forced to tell him all that led to my being locked in, and his rage was as great as it was just. He vowed to seek my recreant husband, and avenge the black insult, even though he had to dip his hands in human blood, and it required all my eloquence to make him forego this hasty determination.

"It was only when I reluctantly consented to separate from Pennington for good and all, that he yielded; and it was to procure evidence against him that our little ambush was prepared.

"By means of a skeleton key in the hands of a detective whom he sought out and employed, Brother King opened my prison door, and together we finally mapped out a plan of procedure which promised to end in the self-betrayal of Lloyd Pennington, sufficiently at least to insure my procuring a divorce from him without too great publicity.

"At the first sound of footsteps, my brother and the detective hastened to place themselves in ambush, from which they were to emerge when I gave an agreed-upon signal. Great was my surprise when, instead of Lloyd Pennington, his treacherous bosom friend made his appearance; but it promised to serve our purpose equally as well, and I played my part bravely, until the sudden appearance of my false husband.

"I must have succumbed, then, but for the support given by my allies in waiting. They could clear my name of the foul charge, and turn his dastardly blow back on the head of the villain who dealt it.

"At my signal they broke from cover, and Lloyd Pennington stood aghast, for the moment unable to comprehend its full meaning; but then, with a howling curse of fury, he strove to recover the weapon of which he had been deprived by his ally, when he sought to frighten me into a confession of guilt by threatening my life. He failed, however, for he had no weak woman to deal with now, and under the muzzles of two revolvers he speedily cooled down, outwardly at least.

"Under the same significant persuasion, the man who had so triumphantly exhibited the key to my chamber, was led to make a full confession of their dastardly plot to effect my ruin, which King wrote down as the sentences dropped reluctantly from his lips. When he concluded, he was obliged to add his signature to the confession, which was witnessed by all the others, save my husband.

"Then I confronted him, and all the bitter wrongs I had suffered at his hands, all the insults and cruel blows, were summed up in a few passionate sentences. I told him, then, how his tool had betrayed him, and I swore that he should never wed the heiress he had been courting while yet my husband, nor any other, until the grave closed over me. I would hold this confession for use against him, should he ever attempt to obtain a divorce from me in order to wed another victim. I bade him go his way and never trouble me again. If he dared to molest me in any manner, or if he sought to claim his right as a husband, I would produce more than this confession—I would—and here I breathed a few words into his ear which caused him to grow white as a corpse, and tremble like a leaf in a gale of wind.

"That is enough of that peculiar scene. It makes my heart grow sick, even at this distant day, to merely recall it.

"Lloyd Pennington vanished from town that very night, and no person could say what had become of him. I went to live with my brother, and of the next few months there is little to tell, save that my health began to fail me, and poor brother felt that I was gradually fading away to leave him alone on earth.

"He suspected the truth, though I would never acknowledge it. I am ashamed of the admission now, but I was pining for the love I had lost—I felt that without Lloyd Pennington life was not worth the trouble of living. And yet I knew him to be the assassin of my parents—explain it how you can; I simply tell the truth, to my own shame.

"For a year we heard nothing of Lloyd Pennington, and it sometimes seemed to me that the earth must have opened and engulfed him, as he fled that night, in a fury of baffled rage and guilt. But then the trail of the serpent again showed itself, faint and indistinct, but sufficient for recognition by those who had learned to know him so thoroughly.

"Three separate times my life was attempted, but it almost seemed as though Providence had me under its especial care, for as often I escaped with life, though the last attempt left me on what was, for months, believed to be my death-bed.

"Each time the clew seemed to point to Lloyd Pennington, and I now know that our first suspicions were correct. He no doubt believed I suspected his agency, for he lost no pains in covering up his trail, only to come forth from his hiding to strike another blow at my life.

"It would have been better for him had he went his way and left me alone, for I believe I would have pined to death, in time, feeding on my hopeless love. As it was, his unrelenting malignity worked a perfect cure in the end, and when I left that sick bed, it was with only one purpose in life; to haunt Lloyd Pennington, and ruin his every hope in life, even as he had destroyed mine.

"From that day to this, I have been a festering thorn in his side. I have followed him like a sleuth, no matter where he went or what cunning disguises he might assume. With the fortune which my brother divided with me, I hired a trusty force of fearless men to serve me as body-guard, and thanks to this precaution, I am still alive. Scores of times Lloyd Pennington has sought to kill me, but as often has he been foiled, and the blow returned—not at his life, for I willed that he should live on to more thoroughly feel my vengeance for a ruined life.

"He came here, and I followed him, to save from his evil arts a young and pure girl. I have placed her on her guard, though as yet he does not suspect my agency, or he would have fled from Bismarck as from the plague.

"Through my brother, I learned that he had noticed you, and when I also learned that you were making inquiries concerning Lloyd Pennington, I resolved to see you and warn you of the great peril into which you were running blindfold.

"If you had accepted my warning in the same spirit it was offered, I would not have troubled you with my sad story. But you were like a little bird that has come within the fascinated circle with which a rattlesnake surrounds itself, and seeing that no less positive proof would be accepted, I have torn the veil from the black past, and shown you the real nature of the demon whom you seek.

"For the last time be warned! Abandon your dangerous quest, and return to your home. If you persist, Lloyd Pennington will add you to his long list of hapless victims, so sure as there is a heaven above us this night!"

Like one uttering a prophecy, the strange woman stood before Medea, her right hand uplifted, her face flushed, her eyes flaming with a red light as though filled with fire.

A cold, icy hand seemed grasping her heart, almost stopping its throbbings, but Medea Pennington showed no outward signs of flinching, and the voice in which she spoke was clear and without trembling:

"I thank you for the interest you seem to feel in my welfare, but had your story been tenfold as sad and tragic, its recital could not have weakened my purpose. I am bound by an oath taken beside the death-bed of a man who was all the world to me. With his cold hand clasping mine, I pledged myself to seek Lloyd Pennington until I found him, or until I became convinced that the grave had forever claimed him. That oath I must keep, even though I knew the attempt would lead me to my own grave."

"It will—or worse!" exclaimed the woman, passionately.

"To death, perhaps, but never to the disgrace at which you hint," quietly replied Medea.

A bitter, mocking laugh, then the sharp words:

"So I would have said, in the innocent days of my youth; and I was stronger far than ever you dare claim to be—"

"In person, possibly; never in spirit, else you would have a far different tale to tell."

Proudly the words were uttered, and unflinchingly Medea confronted the woman, whose

face became almost that of a fury. Her dusky eyes glittered like those of an enraged serpent, her grand form dilated, and one hand caught at the jeweled haft of a poniard which nestled in her bosom, as though she would pluck it forth and bury it in the heart of the girl who so undauntedly flung this bitter truth into her teeth.

But still swifter in her actions, Medea drew the revolver with which she had taken the precaution to arm herself before leaving the hotel in company with Professor King Smith, and the perforated muzzle stared the enraged woman full in the face, checking her hand as the gleaming dagger was half-drawn from her bosom.

"I am prepared to defend myself—" began Medea, when there came an impatient rap at the door, and the voice of the fat little professor muttered:

"Come, sister, are you not through? Time is up, and unless we are back promptly, Honest Giles will raise the entire town! Open and let me in!"

"In one moment," replied the woman, returning the dagger to its hiding-place, her rage apparently appeased as she addressed Medea: "For the last time, will you be warned?"

"I have spoken plainly enough. I must keep my oath. Tell me the name under which I may find Lloyd Pennington, and let me go," calmly replied Medea, slipping her pistol into her pocket, though still keeping her hand on the butt.

"So be it, then!" her strange hostess cried, her voice hard and cold. "Your fate be on your own head, for I will never more lift finger to aid you!"

"I ask it not. Only keep your promise."

"The man you seek now calls himself Monte Jim," said the woman, brushing past the almost stupefied girl and opening the door to admit her brother, addressing him sharply: "I am done with her. She knows all she came to learn, and is ready to go back with you. Take her, and begone!"

The little professor seemed well accustomed to sudden changes on her part, for without a word in response to her almost savage reception, he touched Medea on the arm. Stunned, she turned and followed him through the door, without another glance toward the woman who had so thoroughly astounded her by mentioning that name—by declaring that Monte Jim was the person she was seeking as Lloyd Pennington.

For a moment the light from the house fell full across her pale face, and it was seen by a passer-by, who uttered a sharp cry of amazement as he caught her arm:

"You, Miss Pennington! coming from the house of that infamous woman!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER.

THOUGH he held the game apparently in his own hands, thanks to his boldness and the precautions which he had taken to have his men on hand and in readiness for any emergency which might chance to arise, Monte Jim knew that Curly Kaine would not submit to exposure before all that crowd, if there were any possible means of turning the tables on him.

Thanks to this, he was not taken entirely by surprise when the chandeliers fell with a crash, and swiftly he dropped down below the level of the table, just in time to avoid a bullet which sped from out a little cloud of flame-tinged smoke lighting up the rigid, desperate face of the gambler.

A cry of agony followed the shot, but it came not from the lips of Monte Jim, and the figure that dropped heavily to the floor was of one who had taken no more active part in that night's work than to watch the curious battle of the rival gamblers.

Amidst the utter confusion which followed the fall of the chandeliers and the extinguishment of the lights, the voice of Alva Pennington rung out distinctly:

"Hands off, here—fight fair! Ah, I'm cut!"

Monte Jim was half-way under the table, making for Curly Kaine when he heard and recognized that voice, and without a second's hesitation he abandoned all idea of taking his revenge at that time, and, backing out, caught the sinking form of the young gambler in his arms.

The panic-stricken crowd was rushing toward the bar, in which lights were still burning, though but little penetrated the thick curtains which hung over the arch-shaped opening in the partition.

For a brief space Monte Jim felt himself carried along by the blind, unreasoning rush, but then, holding the limp figure of Pennington on one arm, he struck swiftly with his clubbed revolver, the sweeping blows rapidly clearing a space around him. Then, instead of making his way toward the sheet of light which was now streaming in through the archway, as the foremost of the fugitives tore aside the curtains, Monte Jim hastily retreated to the rear of the room, where yet all was dark.

He was perfectly familiar with his surroundings, and as he reached the rear wall, he quickly unhooked the heavy wooden shutter which guarded a narrow window, and flinging it open, lifted Alva Pennington feet foremost, thrusting him through the opening and suffering him to drop outside. In another instant he scrambled through the aperture, and dropping lightly to his feet gave vent to a low laugh of triumphant mockery.

He knew that Curly Kaine would be watching for him among the fear-maddened crowd as it rushed from the darkened room into the light which streamed into the archway in readiness to shoot him down without mercy.

"All right!" he muttered, with a keen glance around him. "Let him have his swing now. I'll fetch him in the long run. Only for Pennington—"

The man whose name just fell from his lips, suddenly rose from the ground and seeming to recognize him as a foe, struck out viciously at him in the dim shadows.

Luckily for Monte Jim, Pennington was yet a tenderfoot, and in his bewildered condition forgot the weapons he carried, striking out with his clinched fists instead. His brain dizzy, his senses confused, the wounded man misjudged his distance in the gloom, and the force of his unresisted blows turned him half-around, and he staggered into the firm grip of Monte Jim, who muttered hastily in his ear:

"Don't try to make yourself a bigger idiot than nature intended, Alva Pennington! I pulled you out of that rumpus, at the cost of my revenge on that crooked rascal, Curly Kaine. Don't make me wish I had left you to be trampled under those feet—there wouldn't be a whole bone left in your skin by this time, only for me."

"Somebody cut me," muttered Pennington, irresolutely struggling to free himself. "Darn such a cowardly trick! in the dark, too, when I wasn't on my guard. Let up, man! I'm going back to get even with the dirty scoundrel!"

The iron grip of the dashing sport grew still tighter, and he held the enraged young man helpless as he muttered:

"So you shall get even, old fellow; I pledge you my word on that score. But I'm not going to let you run your head into a hornet's nest, until we see just how deep that knife went. You're coming with me, to my rooms, just now."

"Who in blazes are you, anyhow?"

"The truest friend you have in all Bismarck this night, if you would only believe it, Alva Pennington," was the earnest response, as Monte Jim, with a gentle force, led the young man around the corner and out of sight of the Clipper Shades, out of the front door of which the crowd was now rushing, with loud cries and shouts of excitement which bade fair to soon arouse the entire town.

"Curse the friends!" muttered Pennington, on whom the liquor which he had freely imbibed earlier in the evening seemed just beginning to take effect. "Where's Frank? He ran off and left me—and I had cut—clean through to the hollow, I reckon, from the way it smarted! Devil take all such frien' as that, say I!"

Beginning to fear that Pennington was hurt worse than he had at first believed, Monte Jim hurried him along, half-carrying him on his strong arm, pausing not until the hotel was reached. Not a little to his relief, he found the bar deserted by all save the landlord, the others having rushed headlong to the scene of action at the first alarm.

"Get hot water, cloths, liquor—you know what's wanted, old man!" hastily muttered Monte Jim, as he caught the form of his companion up in his arms and crossed the room. "This gent has been cut in a row at the Clipper Shades, and I brought him here. Lively, now!"

Swiftly climbing the stairs, Monte Jim bore his heavy burden into his room, placing him on the bed, while he turned to strike a light. Not a little to his surprise, when he performed this, and turned once more to his patient, Alva Pennington was sitting up, staring around him with a bewildered air.

It was a curious, but not unprecedented fact. Showing the effects of liquor but slightly while playing, no sooner had that treacherous blow slaying his life, than Alva Pennington became so drunk that he could scarcely stand alone. The free flow of blood, while being helped to Monte Jim's room at the hotel, apparently drained the liquor from his system as well, for, though plainly bewildered, the young man now seemed as sober as he had before receiving his wound.

"Monte Jim!" he muttered, confusedly looking around him. "How in thunder did I come here, and what's happened, anyhow?"

Just then the landlord put in an appearance, and Monte Jim made an evasive reply as he hastened to look at the injury the young man had received.

At first his countenance was grave enough, but a brief examination chased away the shadow, for he saw that the wound was only a superficial one, though the flow of blood had been considerable. The blow had been dealt from behind, and plainly meant murder, but the steel

had struck a little too low and too far to the left, glancing along the ribs a few inches below the left arm-pit.

"You'll be as sound as ever inside of a week, old fellow!" cried Monte Jim cheerily, as he completed the bandaging as neatly as though he were a professional. "If you lay low to-morrow, nobody'd ever suspect you of being an invalid."

"Who do you reckon it was cut me?"

"A mistake, no doubt!" was the quick response. "It was intended for me, I reckon, but the rascal got mixed up when the lights fell, and we changed our positions so suddenly. Don't worry over it. Some day you may have the chance to repay the compliment, with interest added to date."

These words were drawn forth by a sudden cloud which settled over the face of the wounded man. His chin dropped on his palms, and he looked the picture of sullen despair as he stared moodily at the floor, marked with his blood.

"Better have left me alone, and let them finish their cowardly work!" he muttered, surlily. "My money is gone, and with it goes my last hope. A man had better be in Hades than on earth without money!"

Monte Jim made no reply, but pulling a chair up to the table, drew from his pockets great handfuls of bank-notes and gold coin, among which his white, supple fingers moved rapidly, sorting them out into piles, while Alva Pennington moodily watched him, his face growing darker and more forbidding as he calculated the amount of money in sight.

Monte Jim spoke not until he had completed his inventory of the money before him, but then he turned toward Pennington and abruptly demanded:

"How much did you blow in to-night, my friend?"

"Every dollar I owned!" was the moody response.

"And that was, in round figures?"

"Five thousand, besides the thousand you loaned me. If you can find any person fool enough to offer you a dollar for that debt, you'd better take it. It's all you'll ever see of that thousand, unless there happens to be a saw-bones in these diggings who will put up a few ducats for the chance of getting the corpus of an infernal ass to dull his instruments on. If so, close the bargain, and I'll furnish the stiff!"

Reckless as this speech sounded, Monte Jim could see that underneath it lay a current of truth. Penniless, Alva Pennington cared little how soon he left this world.

"Time enough for that when all other means fail, old fellow," coolly retorted the sport, his fingers busy among the bank-notes. "There you are, my friend. Just run over it after me, and see that the amount is correct."

As he spoke, Monte Jim pushed the smaller pile of notes toward Pennington; but the latter made no move toward taking them, his blood-shot eyes glaring almost fiercely at the other as he spoke:

"What are you driving at, anyway?"

"Paying my honest debts; nothing more!" coolly.

"You intend that money for me?"

"Certainly. It belongs to you. Put it in your pocket."

"That won't wash, Monte Jim. You played the trick on me once to-night, to say nothing of the other evening, but it won't work again," almost savagely muttered the young man.

"A trick, you say?" quietly uttered the sport, his eyes opening widely. "May I ask you to explain what sort of a trick you have reference to? How am I trying to trick you?"

"That's what I don't know; but I'm not all fool, and I know that a man of your caliber doesn't shed his money quite so profusely, without seeing his way of getting even in the long run. I took back the first sum because I knew that I had been gouged out of it by your gang. The other, this evening, I could not persist in refusing while those cursed cards were before my eyes, and, like a fool, I felt that I would not only be able to repay you before I rose from the table, but I believed I could win back my own money. I lost, of course; but if I live long enough, I'll repay your loan, with interest."

"So much for that. As for this money, put it in your pocket, where it belongs, and don't repeat your offer. You've done me a good turn this night and I don't want to quarrel with you if I can help it. But accept your money, without the slightest claim on it, I will not!"

"Now it's my turn," coolly uttered Monte Jim, as the wounded man sunk back in his seat, breathless from the energy with which he had poured forth his rapid, earnest speech. "Let the money lay where it is, until I prove to you that, in common justice, it belongs to you more than to me."

"You can't stuff that down me!" muttered Pennington.

"That's all right," smiled the sport. "I won't force you to take it unless you are convinced that it belongs to you, by good gambler's law and usage."

"When I stepped inside the Clipper Shades, this evening, I had not the slightest idea of play-

ing faro. I noticed you fighting the tiger, and paused to watch your style of playing.

"It wasn't long before I saw you were putting up your money on a regular system; that you were what, in the vernacular, we professionals term an angel. In plainer words, a man who bets according to rule, sticking to the same cards from first to last, regardless of the fact whether he lost or won.

"Now I needn't tell you that it is just such betters who are most welcome in any faro-room, because an expert dealer can, while seemingly playing a perfectly square game, with an orthodox box, clean them out, every time. You doubt, but have patience, and I'll prove the truth of my words to you.

"I saw that Curly Kaine had learned your system, and that he was resolved to pluck you clean, if only on account of his little squabble with you the other evening, on the train.

"For that reason I chipped in, putting my bets directly in opposition to yours, so that when you lost, I would win."

"Judging from the tilt between you this evening, that fellow has still less cause to love you. If, as you say, it lay in his power to control the cards, why wouldn't he take you into camp instead of me?" asked Pennington.

"Simply because he knew I would be here tomorrow and the next day, and for a year, perhaps, while he could not be sure that he would ever get another whack at your bundle," was the calm response. "But in the end he did try to hit me hard, as you saw, when my manner of betting told him I had dropped to his little game with you.

"After the second deal, he put up splits on us, using the cards you had made your favorites, hoping to catch us both at one stroke, without running any danger of losing himself. You saw how it worked, but you didn't comprehend its full meaning. You doubled your bets, while I drew out, the better to watch the working of the machine. And I *did* see it, too!

"You wondered why I pressed that money on you, when you were about to draw out of the game. I gave you one reason then but I held a still better one in reserve. You did not notice anything important going on while we were arguing the point, but I did. I saw Curly Kaine was digging a mine, and, thanks to my earlier watching how the cards came out, I caught the turn he was putting up, and resolved to hit him heavy.

"I knew he was trying the odd-card trick, but I had him down so fine that I was sure to win, if not by the cards as he made them come out, then by exposing his foul dealing. You tried the turn but guessed it wrong. I called it as the cards lay in the box, and forced Curly to bring them out right. The rest you know, quite as well as I can tell you."

"All except why you say this money is mine."

"That comes next. I never play at faro, for I know a man cannot beat it one time out of a hundred. I only entered the game to keep you from being fleeced, by winning what you lost. Only for you I would not have risked or won a dollar. Through you, I quit winner to the extent of some thirty-eight thousand. I have deducted the amount I lent you, and the five thousand I returned to you the other evening, then divided the remainder in equal portions. One is mine, the other yours, as any gambler in the land will be ready to swear, on bearing the facts of the case as I have stated them. Are you convinced, old fellow?" lightly laughed Monte Jim.

During all this talk Alva Pennington had been closely watching the sport, and now his voice was full of conviction as he made reply:

"Convinced? Yes, of one thing: that with you, Monte Jim, as you call yourself, blood is thicker than water!"

"What do you mean by that?" ejaculated the sport, his big blue eyes opening widely, full of innocent surprise.

"That your name is not James Ince, but Lloyd Pennington! That you are not the stranger you seem, but my brother!"

CHAPTER XIX.

MONTE JIM AS A MAN AND A BROTHER.

MONTE JIM stared fixedly into the countenance of his companion for a brief space, then leaned across the table and lightly grasped Alva Pennington's wrist between his thumb and forefinger, after the fashion of a doctor feeling the pulse of a patient.

Amazed in his turn, the wounded man made no attempt to withdraw his hand, until, with a short nod, the dashing sport relaxed his gentle grasp of his own accord, muttering:

"I thought so! Feverish—decidedly feverish!"

"That's too thin. You can't throw dust in my eyes any longer," sharply retorted Pennington. "I'm neither feverish nor crazy, but clearer-brained and wider awake than I have been at any time since we first met on the train. I say it again—you're my brother, Lloyd Pennington!"

"You're dead sure you've called the turn this deal?"

"I know it!" was the positive reply. "I was blind as a bat not to have suspected the truth at the very outset. If not Lloyd Pennington, why did you exhibit such a strong interest in me and mine when I was butting my brains out against Blinky Scott and his crooked pictures? What made you return the money I lost?—in one word, your own conduct is proof sufficient that you are no stranger."

Monte Jim listened quietly, a peculiar light in his big blue eyes, a slight twitching of his blonde mustaches; and it was this that caused Alva Pennington to so abruptly break off his enumeration of the proofs to which his eyes had just been opened, ending with that dogged reassertion.

"There's no use denying it, then?" slowly uttered Monte Jim, leaning back in his chair and gazing into the face of his companion, through a circling cloud of cigar-smoke. "You won't let a man throw up his hand or call for fresh cards?"

"Deny it from now until sunrise, and I'll stick to my belief," was the dogged reply. "You're Lloyd Pennington, or I'm a natural-born idiot!"

Monte Jim brushed the smoke aside, and leaned forward to gaze keenly into the flushed countenance of the speaker. Only for a moment; then, with a short laugh, he extended his right hand across the table, uttering:

"All right, if you will have it so! Shake, brother!"

"Then you own up to being Lloyd Pennington?"

"Why not?" was the careless response. "You say that even should I deny the charge, your conviction could not be changed. The name is not bad: it has a sort of aristocratic sound, and will answer my purpose quite as well as that of James Ince. I have as much right to one name as the other, at any rate."

"I can take oath that you're Lloyd Pennington!"

"That settles it then, of course. By the way, do you happen to remember how it was you came to lose me?"

Alva Pennington scowled a little as he returned that keen gaze, for he felt that the sport was laughing at him, though outwardly Monte Jim was sober as a deacon at prayers. But he was doggedly positive that he had at last solved the mystery with which the card-sharp and his actions had been surrounded ever since their first encounter, and would not permit his belief to be shaken.

"Why ask that, when you must know better than I?"

"For information, dear brother," smiled Monte Jim. "If I am Lloyd Pennington, surely I had ought to know something of his past life and exploits? Unluckily, I have forgotten all about that portion of my career. Loss of memory during a severe fever, I dare say. But—oblige me, brother."

"You disappeared in a night, ten years ago, leaving no clew behind you," doggedly muttered Pennington.

"No clew, eh? Then there was no bloody trail—no tremendous crime to startle the neighborhood?"

His companion shook his head in the negative.

"What do you mean by asking such a foolish question?"

Monte Jim heaved a sigh as of relief, and sunk back in his chair, drawing briskly at his cigar before replying:

"I am glad of that. I was afraid I might be somebody famous or infamous, according to the standpoint from which you choose to view it. Famous is good—there's money in a name, provided it don't smell too awfully strong of hemp."

A hot, angry flush overspread the countenance of Alva Pennington, for he could no longer doubt that Monte Jim was ridiculing him. He leaned forward on the table, bringing one fist heavily down, as he said:

"Look here, you; enough nonsense. Let's get down to business. Come out flat-footed. Are you or are you not the man I'm looking for—Lloyd Pennington?"

"I thought you settled that fact at the outset," and the card-sharp opened his eyes in surprise. "As far as I am concerned, I don't care a continental, one way or the other, as long as there ain't a hempen necktie waiting for this Lloyd Pennington. Tell you what we can do," with a sudden lighting up of his countenance, as he picked a double eagle from the money which lay in two piles on the table between them, and spinning it swiftly on the level surface as he spoke: "Let this settle the momentous question. Heads, I am—tails, I am not—watch the little joker and see for yourself that you are getting fair play! Make your game while she rolls, gentlemen! All made, and—Heads she am! My long-lost brother, come to me arrums!"

Alva Pennington dropped back into his chair with a snapping snarl, as Monte Jim arose and stretched his arms across the chair with a mock tragic air.

"Drop your durn foolishness," he growled, surlily. "I'd rather you were Lloyd Pennington, as I firmly believe—"

"Since you believe it, and the fates have de-

cided that I am he, I'll not deny it any longer. I am Lloyd Pennington, on one condition," interrupted Monte Jim, soberly.

"And that condition?"

"Is this: take up that money and put it in your pocket."

Alva Pennington gazed at the speaker intently for a brief space, then silently obeyed, folding the package of bills and placing them in his wallet.

"I accept the condition," he said, gravely. "Money is very dear to me, now. With it, I hope to win a fortune, and by means of that fortune, gain a wife."

A swift change came over the face of Monte Jim as he listened to this speech. All trace of mockery vanished, and in its place came a gravity rarely to be seen there.

"You are alluding to Miss Pennington, I presume?"

"Yes. Let me tell you just how we stand in our relations to each other, and then you will understand why it is I am so anxious to have you prove yourself Lloyd Pennington, as well as my reasons for betting high in hopes of winning a fortune off-hand," said the young man, his voice grave and earnest.

"Her sole purpose in coming here is to find you—"

"To find me?" echoed Monte Jim, in evident surprise.

"Or Lloyd Pennington, which amounts to the same thing."

"Of course; I forgot my new name," with a short laugh. "Don't let that trouble you, brother. I'll soon grow accustomed to it, I dare say. Searching for me, you say? What for?"

"That's the puzzle!" ejaculated the young man, scowling with evident irritation. "She's kept her secret, even from me, though she promises to let me know all, when her search has fairly succeeded."

"Mysterious!" commented Monte Jim, with a slow shake of the head, as he thoughtfully pulled at his blonde mustaches. "Do you know, brother, I'm getting a little nervous? Suppose the young lady has some secret claim on me? Suppose she comes forward as a claimant of a long-lost husband, or something of that sort? It would hardly shock or surprise me more than the claim you persist in making."

"Don't be an infernal fool!" growled Pennington, too much in earnest to relish a jest, if Monte Jim intended.

"Which you think I would be, for deserting such a charming lady? I quite agree with you, dear brother. And if she really has any matrimonial sentiments, I'll do my best to meet her half-way; be sure of that!"

"And be sure of this," cried Alva Pennington, leaning across the table with a fully-charged pistol, his eyes glowing with a red light, his strong teeth grating. "Were you tempted by brother, I'd cut your heart out the moment you stopped between that woman and me! As that plan talks!"

"But that's the way the wind blows, is it?" exclaimed Monte Jim, elevating his eyebrows.

"If I don't marry Medea Pennington, no other man shall ever fill the position," added Pennington, with more earnestness, but not a whit less earnestness of purpose. "I say this that you may have no excuse for making a mistake. I say, just as frankly, that I believe you can win her for your wife, if you think proper to make the effort."

"And as a wedding-gift, you would present me with a bit of cold steel or a few blue pills, placed where they would do the most good?" laughed Monte Jim.

"Unless you killed me before I got the chance," doggedly replied the other.

"As an affectionate brother, you promise to be a success, I must confess."

"Look here, Lloyd; let me tell you. I've worshipped Medea ever since I left off round jackets. I know I don't deserve such a treasure—that I am not half good enough for her—but if I can't have her for my wife, no other man shall while I draw the breath of life!"

"Well, you are a hard bit, sure enough!"

"I loved her so desperately that I actually was afraid to tell her so, until less than six months ago, when her father died, leaving her an orphan, alone in the world, save for me."

"And me," interposed Monte Jim. "If she is your cousin, and I am your brother, she must be my relative, as well."

"I thought you dead at that time: in fact, we all thought so, for Medea and I had often spoken of you, wondering what had caused your sudden disappearance. But let me take the story of how we came here, on your track, by the right end."

"When uncle died, I plucked up courage to avow my love for Medea, and asked her to marry me. I really had some hopes of success, for she had always appeared fond of me, though I showed myself such a bashful fool in her presence. As she was left alone in the world, I felt reasonably sure she would accept me, and you can imagine what a terrible blow it was to me when she said plainly that she held herself

bound to another man, if he chose to accept her hand.

"As soon as I could recover the use of my tongue I asked her for an explanation, and she gave it, though with a reservation I have never been able to comprehend.

"She said that she had promised her father, as he lay on his death-bed, to search the world over, if need be, for Lloyd Pennington, whom, until then, she had believed dead long ago. She had sworn to find him, if living, in order to right a great wrong. She showed me an extract from the will he had left, but which was not to be opened until Lloyd Pennington was discovered, or positive proof of his death found, but that only increased my perplexity, and made the muddle deeper."

"Any objections to let a man know what that extract revealed?" asked Monte Jim, carelessly.

Alva Pennington gazed keenly into his face, but it told no tales, and the big blue eyes were fixed on the slowly-widening rings of smoke that floated above his head.

"It made Lloyd Pennington an equal heir with her to the immense fortune which uncle died possessed of, on condition that the two were married to each other within a year from the time Lloyd Pennington was discovered, if living. If she refused to marry him, on being asked, all save a comparatively small sum was to go to him. If he was dead, the entire fortune belonged to her."

"The old fellow must surely have been cracked!"

"So I hinted, but Medea would not listen. She declared that she would devote the remainder of her life to searching for the missing man, but what she would find him and carry out the last commands of her parent."

"Even to marrying the lost heir?"

"Even to that extremity," was the moody reply. "I told her how madly I loved her, and begged her to marry me. I swore I would help her to find Lloyd, and would willingly divide the money with him, if living; but she would not listen. She had taken a solemn oath, and would keep it, if possible. She held that not only did the money belong to him by rights, but that until he learned the full conditions of the will, and himself declined to carry out that one provision, she was also in bonds—was not her own mistress!"

"Romantic—very!" commented Monte Jim, his countenance growing more animated, a peculiar look filling his eyes. "Do you know, my dear fellow, I begin to believe that I am Lloyd Pennington, after all! Since you admit that you stand no show with the charming creature, why not?"

He paused abruptly as Alva Pennington hissed out a bitter curse, striking his tightly-clinched fist on the table with a force that caused the oil lamp to jump and totter.

"Take care, Monte Jim—Lloyd Pennington, or whatever your rightful name may be—take care, *you!*" he grated, savagely. "I've given you fair warning that no man can cross my path in this matter, and both of us live! I love Medea Pennington with all my heart and soul! I'll marry her, or she dies a maiden! If you were ten times my brother, I'd kill you before I let you rob me of her love!"

"Come, old fellow, don't make an ass of yourself!"

"You've got your warning," sullenly muttered the other.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN HONEST MAN'S FAITH.

To say that Medea Pennington was thoroughly surprised and not a little alarmed when she felt her arm caught and heard those startling words, but imperfectly expresses her emotions. There was an explosive oath of utter disgust, though it came from neither her lips nor those of the man who so abruptly made his appearance on the scene; and when she turned instinctively toward the fat little professor, it was only to catch a fleeting glimpse of his coat-tails as he vanished around the corner of the building, with more haste than grace.

"Mr. Rice—how you startled me!" murmured Medea, hardly realizing the words she uttered.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Pennington," replied the ex-conductor, for it was indeed he who e abrupt appearance and recognition had resulted in the sudden flight of Professor King Smith. "I was so startled—so utterly amazed at recognizing you here, at night, alone, and coming from the house of that woman—that I permitted my feelings to get the better of my politeness."

"I was not alone," hesitated Medea, looking around her, with a slightly embarrassed air, when Rice quickly broke in:

"If I am in the way, Miss Pennington, you have only to hint as much, and I will retire. Only my strong interest in your welfare led me to interfere, knowing that you were a stranger in a strange place, and therefore not to be expected to know the character of this house and that of the notorious woman who lives here."

His tone and manner, more than the words

he uttered, so startled Medea that she cut him short as he was lifting his hat in a formal bow, preparatory to turning away, clinging to his arm with both her hands, her voice unsteady as she spoke:

"I am glad you came—glad you addressed me, Mr. Rice. As you say, I am a stranger here, and I begin to fear that I have acted very imprudently in my great anxiety to perform the work which my dying father left to me as a sacred charge. But I had no one to consult, no one to advise me."

"Then I was forgotten?" with an air of gentle reproach.

"Not so," was the quick, almost eager reply. "But there was not time—I had to decide on the instant, or perhaps forever lose the clew to the mystery which has haunted me, day and night, for months. If you could only understand—if I might tell you all!"

"I do not seek to force your confidence, Miss Pennington, but once more: if I can in any way be of service to you, it will make me only too happy."

Plainly, almost clumsily, the wish to serve her was shaped by the young man, but now, as before, Medea recognized the deep earnestness, the strong and pure devotion which underlay his speech, and impulsively she drew closer to him, casting all doubts to the winds.

"I will take you at your word, my friend—but not here, in the dark," with a swift, apprehensive glance around her. "If you will take me back to the hotel, I will tell you all."

Will Rice drew her arm within his, retaining her little gloved hand, perhaps unconsciously, for the usually cool, steady-nerved railroader was now strangely flustered by that warm, trembling contact.

"I will act as your escort, with pleasure, because it is not safe for a lady to be abroad at this hour of the evening, in a rough town like this, but as for the rest—your confiding in me, I mean—do not do so, without you feel you can trust me implicitly."

What Medea might have replied to this speech will never be known, for at that moment a wild uproar burst out in the thicker portion of the town toward which they were now making their way. Pistol-shots, shouts, curses and shrill screams as of men in mortal agony.

"Pale and trembling, Medea clung to the stalwart arm of the ex-conductor.

"Only a drunken row, Miss Pennington," was his hasty assurance. "There is no danger, as long as we keep from running headlong into the thick of it. I'm afraid we'll have to wait a little, for the row appears to be between us and the hotel."

If the whole truth must be told, Will Rice was not exactly sorry that this disturbance had broken forth just when and where it did. Though his acquaintance with the young woman was so brief, measured by days and hours, it was quite long enough for him to have fallen over head and ears in love with her. Nor was this sentiment in the least shaken by the somewhat peculiar and compromising situation in which he had just discovered her. He could have taken oath that there was nothing wrong in her part of the affair.

Keeping in the deep shadows, they watched and listened, while the row at the Clipper Shades reached its culmination and gradually subsided. A few dark figures flitted past them in the dark, evidently hastening to see the "fun," but without observing them, and then, when comparative quiet was again restored, they once more moved toward their destination.

"May I ask—was it your cousin who was with you, back there?" hesitatingly asked Will Rice.

"No," faltered Medea.

"Excuse me—I didn't know—"

"Mr. Rice," impulsively, "you shall know all; but not now. Please wait until we reach the hotel."

He said no more, and a few minutes more brought them to the hotel, just too late to see Honest Giles hastening up the stairs with bandages and hot water for the wound received by Alva Pennington.

"You will come in, Mr. Rice?" asked Medea, as the gentleman released her arm on reaching the steps, adding impulsively as he hesitated: "You must! In self-justice I must make an explanation of my conduct this night. Of all men, I would not have you go away under a false impression!"

There was an earnestness in her low tones that thrilled him through and through, causing his heart to jump with a new-born joy, and the blood to course hotly through his veins.

Without a word, he followed her into the parlor. Medea cast aside her wraps, then turned impulsively toward him, her earnest eyes holding his spellbound as she asked:

"Mr. Rice, will you please tell me what you meant by the words you uttered when you first recognized me by the door of that house? You spoke as though it would be a disgrace to an honest woman to be seen coming out of it."

It was an embarrassing question, but with those eyes on his, Will Rice could not refuse to

reply as requested, and he did so without evasion.

"I will answer your question as frankly as it is asked, Miss Pennington," he said, gravely. "The woman who lives there is one of the most notorious characters in Bismarck. Her name is Helen Brinston, and you may judge of the reputation she bears, when I tell you that she is nicknamed Hell-and-Brinston!"

At his grave speech, Medea turned pale as a ghost, and sunk down in her chair, hiding her face in her hands. Will Rice impulsively started toward her, but just then there came the sound of rapid footsteps, and Honest Giles entered the room, uttering a little exclamation as he recognized Miss Pennington seated there.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her of the accident which had befallen her cousin, but he checked himself in time, and with a muttered apology for his intrusion, he hastened through to the office.

His sudden entrance, and consequent embarrassment, produced one good effect, in restoring the nerve of the shaken girl.

She motioned Rice to be seated, then said:

"I am deeply obliged to you for your frank reply, Mr. Rice, greatly as it has shocked me. From the first I felt a strange and powerful repugnance toward that creature, though I was unable to explain it, even to myself. And yet, had I known all, I must have paid her that visit."

"Of course you must have had your reasons, and I have full faith that they were good ones," said Rice, gravely. "But if I had a sister I would rather see her cold in her shroud than to have her recognized in company with that woman!"

Medea flushed hotly, then grew paler than before.

"If I am disgraced, I cannot help it now. I would take the same step, under the same circumstances, though I knew it would leave me without a friend on the face of the earth. To any other person, I would decline to justify myself, but somehow, I would deeply regret leaving you under a false impression, and if you will consent to listen—"

With an impulsive movement, Will Rice drew his chair close to the one she occupied, and caught her hands in his, holding them firmly though gently, as she tried to withdraw them. His honest eyes were full of light, and truth itself showed on his brow, and rung in his deep, manly tones:

"Miss Pennington, please listen to me, before you speak farther. Your voice tells me your feelings are hurt by what I said, or by my blunt manner of speaking. I am sorry, for I would cut off my right hand, sooner than knowingly offend you."

"You spoke of disgrace, and of losing your friends. There is one friend whom you cannot lose, even though that imaginary disgrace was terribly real. I trust you so wholly, that I would disbelieve the evidence of my own eyesight, did it dare tell me you were anything but the purest, loveliest, best little woman in the whole world!"

"Mr. Rice!" faltered Medea, half scared by his vehemence.

"You must let me say it all, now I have begun," he gently interposed, still holding her trembling hands. "I love you with all the power of my nature. I beg of you to give me a little of yours in return, as the most precious gift woman can bestow upon man. I love you—I love you! I could not tell how dearly, though I had all eternity in which to repeat the story!"

"You say this, after what you saw to-night?" murmured the young woman, strongly moved by his intense earnestness.

"Why not? I love you. I wish you to become my wife. I do not pretend to say how it may be with others, but with me there can be no doubt where there is love—and I love you."

If he had spoken for an hour, with each and every word glowing with the most sublime eloquence, Will Rice could not have bettered his case one whit with the woman who listened.

Her cheeks grew softly flushed, her eyes beamed softly upon his honest countenance, and her red-ripe lips trembled as though on the point of giving him the answer he so longed—so breathlessly waited to hear; but only for a moment.

Then her face grew paler, and the light in her eyes altered to one of almost stern resolution.

"I thank you for the trust you hold in me, Mr. Rice, and I will never forget it, or your words. And yet I am almost sorry they were ever spoken, for it is wholly beyond my power to give you the answer you wish to hear."

"Don't speak too soon, Miss Pennington," hastily interrupted Rice, though his eager look began to fade from his honest countenance. "I can wait—I am not fool enough to think you can love me, as yet. But don't say that I may not hope—that you can never love me when you come to know me better. Give me time to teach you—give me a little hope."

"If I could, believe me, Mr. Rice, I would do so," was the grave, almost sad response. "But that is impossible. I am not my own mistress. I am in a measure bound to another—"

"Not pledged?"

"Yes—and no," hesitatingly; then with more decision: "Let me explain to you, Mr. Rice, and then you will see for yourself how peculiarly I am situated in life. It is a painful story for me to relate."

"Then spare yourself," was his quick interposition. "I have no right to ask it of you, and surely no wish to give you pain. Heaven knows! I would be only too happy to spare you all pain—all trouble, even the slightest, if I only might!"

"I believe—and thank you, dear friend," said Medea, pressing his hands as he was slowly, reluctantly withdrawing them from hers. "I am sorry that I cannot give you the reward you crave, but as it is wholly beyond my power, the least I can do is to explain to you how I came to be placed in such a peculiarly trying situation."

"If you insist, I will make no further objections. In this, as in all else, your will shall be my law," he said, simply, little thinking that this very gentleness was making her task all the more difficult to perform.

"My father died six months ago," she said, plunging at once into the subject, as though eager to reach the end of a disagreeable matter. "He died respected by all who knew him, yet there was a terrible secret in his past life, which even I did not suspect, though his only child, and his idol, as I believed with the best of cause. To me alone did he make his painful confession, when the doctors told him all earthly hope was gone; and even me he bound to secrecy, until I had made every effort in my power to find the person whom, in the days gone by, he had so bitterly wronged. He made me swear to spend a lifetime, if no less would suffice, in the quest, which was to end only when I succeeded in finding the person, or obtained positive proof that he was dead."

"Is that all?" eagerly demanded Rice, as she paused. "If that is the bond you spoke of, it need not keep us apart. Marry me, and I will share your search. I will take all the trouble on my own shoulders. I will work night and day until your pledge to the dead is kept. I have no other ties—"

He paused abruptly, checked in his impetuous speech by her uplifted hand. She spoke gravely, tenderly, but with a resolution which even he could not doubt:

"I am sorry you have reverted to that subject, Mr. Rice, but since you have, to avoid any chances of further misunderstanding, I will speak plainly. I do not love you, as a true-hearted man should be loved. I do not know that I could ever love you, as you wish; but neither do I love any other man. I would not permit myself to indulge in such a sentiment, while my life-work remains unfinished. At the same time, I would like to retain your friendship if you can grant it on these terms—absolute avoidance of this subject."

"It will be hard, but I'll try my best," was the grave, earnest response, as he held out his hand; and thus the compact was ratified between them.

"It was in hopes of learning the real name of the man whom my dead father bade me seek that I visited the house of that woman this evening," resumed Medea. "A man came to me here and said that his sister could tell me all. I went with him, and after forcing me to listen to a long and sickening story, that woman declared the man I sought was her husband."

"Why, she claims to be the wife of Curly Kaine, the wretch who so shamefully annoyed you that night on the train."

Medea stared at him in surprise.

"Of Curly Kaine?" she cried, in amazement.

"They claim to be man and wife, yes," was the more quiet reply. "It is rumored that she is wonderfully rich, however she obtained the money. She owns the gambling-hall called the Clipper Shades, which Curly Kaine manages. But surely that scoundrelly fellow cannot be the man you are seeking."

"No—I don't know," helplessly murmured Medea, taken all aback. "She said he was her husband, but that they were living apart—that he had tried to kill her many times—"

Her speech was cut short by a sharp explosion which apparently came from some spot almost directly overhead, closely followed by a wild scream and bitter curse.

A crash of glass followed, then came a loud explosion that appeared to shake the entire building to its very foundation, and with the rumbling echoes was mingled a piercing shriek, as though of some one suffering agony the most intense.

These later sounds apparently came also from the interior of the building, and startled almost out of her senses, Medea clung tremblingly to Rice, as they both leaped to their feet.

CHAPTER XXI.

MONTE JIM TAKES HIS BIBLE OATH.

MONTE JIM quietly met that fiery, threatening glare, and somehow, Alva Pennington found his own eyelids beginning to quiver, and his eyes growing weaker in that silent duel.

"There is one little trait of my character, brother, which you appear to have forgotten,"

deliberately uttered the dashing sport, apparently satisfied with the results of that battle of eyes. "I never take a dare, and if there is a penalty of death attached to it, by way of making it more impressive, then it *does* strike me for all I'm worth. I could no more avoid straddling a blind of that sort, than I could help loving a beautiful woman when she crosses my path. As a man and a brother, Al, I'd advise you to call it a misdeal, and make a fresh start."

"I will, this far," said Alva Pennington, with no less resolution, though his voice was more even and his gestures less extravagant than formerly. "I took the first words that came to my tongue, because I felt too deeply to think of picking and choosing my syllables. We'll deal 'em again, if you like, and this time you can take your Bible oath that I'm giving it to you straight as a string."

"I showed you the ghost of my love for Medea Pennington, and there's no necessity for touching on that point any more particularly just now. I also told you that I wished to gain a fortune in the shortest possible time, because I hoped it would enable me to gain a wife. You know, too, that she is on the hunt for Lloyd Pennington, to carry out the wishes of her dead father. You are Lloyd Pennington—"

"As you will insist on my being that mysterious gentleman, let me give you one hint," lazily interposed the card sharp, with a languid wave of his white hand. "Deal me a little better hand than you did at first, or I'll draw out of the game entirely. If I'm to receive all of the kicks and curses, without any of the half-pence, I reckon I'll have to pass."

"You may jest if your fancy leads you that way," said the young man, seriously, "but I am in sober earnest just now."

"I'll bring you two face to face, and then, if you can prove yourself the genuine Lloyd Pennington to her satisfaction, Medea will make her vow good. She will give you the fortune left in trust by her father, and if you choose to hold her to it, will pledge herself to marry you."

"When you will kindly step in and blow out the brains of your brother, so that you may have the mournful satisfaction of wiping away the tears of the beautiful widow-before-she-was-a-wife—just so!" cut in Monte Jim, with a grim laugh.

Alva Pennington flushed a little, but his voice was grave and steady as he resumed:

"You have a right to mock at the words I spoke when I was half beside myself at the thoughts of losing the only girl I ever loved—the only one I ever can love. I was a fool, and I admit it now. But nevertheless, there was method in my madness, as you shall see."

"When she meets you, I will be present. I did hope to win a fortune, before then, that I might lay it at her feet in place of the one she surrendered to you. As it is, with the odds all in your favor, I'll tell her how dearly I love her, and bid her choose between you and riches at your back and me, with only a stout heart and a life's love for backing."

"If she decides in your favor—as she will, if you care to hold her to the vow she has made—I will forgive her, congratulate you, and then—send a bullet through the place where my brains ought to be."

Calmly, almost coldly, these words were uttered, but Monte Jim was a good judge of human nature, and he saw that every word was fully meant, that Alva Pennington would not live to behold the one woman whom he loved wed with another man. His former speech sounded like wild raving, but this was altogether different.

He leaned across the table, and extended his hand.

"All right, my lad, since you put it in that light," he uttered, seriously. "There's just mule enough in my composition to kick like thunder against anything that sounds like bounce, or a personal threat; but this takes on a different shape, altogether."

"I reckon you're the only person living that believes me to be Lloyd Pennington. I'll drop the name as sharply as I picked it up. Monte Jim is good enough for me. And, if you think best, I'll pull out of Bismarck until Miss Pennington becomes satisfied that her man is not to be found here."

"On the contrary, you will pay her a visit with me, in the morning," said Alva Pennington, quickly.

"And take my Bible oath that I am not her game?"

"Wrong again. You will admit that you are Lloyd Pennington. You will hear her story, and when she makes the offer which she has sworn to do, you will answer her plainly."

"By declining with thanks?" and Monte Jim shrugged his shoulders, making a wry grimace. "That will be no easy task, brother mine; did you know it?"

"Then accept it—and I'll keep my oath, sure as fate!"

"By wasting a bullet that might be put to a far better use? Well, I begin to believe you are just mule enough to do as you threaten, and though the world in general might not consider it a very great loss, I'm free to confess that I

would rather have the blood of almost any other man on my head. So, if you please, we'll consider that point settled. I can make money enough to supply my modest needs, as Monte Jim—and as for fair woman: I've seen a quite sufficiency of them in my lifetime."

Instead of brightening up, Alva Pennington looked, if possible, more gloomy than ever.

"When you meet her—when she talks to you, as I know she *will* talk—when she offers you all—you'll give way. The man don't live who could resist such a temptation!"

"Have you got such a thing as a Bible anywhere about your clothes, old fellow?" suddenly asked Monte Jim.

"No—what do you mean?" ejaculated the other, amazed.

"Never mind—this will serve my purpose just as well," with a little laugh, as he opened a small drawer in the table and produced a pack of cards. "I doubt whether either you or I would know how to word an oath if taken on a genuine Bible; but with this prayer book, we are more at home. All set, old fellow—make your game!"

"Curse your nonsenss, man!" grated Pennington, with a dark frown. "I am talking business!"

"And so am I," was the sober response, as he cut and shuffled the cards with deft skill. "Right here you see my Bible—the only thing in print that I believe in. As a true gambler, when I make oath on this, you can place more dependence on my keeping it than if I was sworn by a justice or a minister of the Gospel on the book they trust to."

"If I can't trust to your plain word, I can't depend on your oath; so put up your cards."

"I thank you, brother," gravely uttered Monte Jim. "You shall not have cause to regret your confidence. I not only pledge you my solemn word of honor, as a gentleman and a gambler, to resign all claims I may or may not have on Miss Pennington, but I swear the same on this, my Bible!"

He touched the cards to his lips, then cast them aside.

"So much for so much," he said, with an air of relief. "And now, if it's no secret, may I ask how you came to spot me as this long-lost brother of yours? How came you to look for me here in Bismarck?"

"A friend of mine furnished the clew. You may remember him; Frank Lisle is his name."

Your friend, you say? Are you certain of that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like him," was the grave response. "If ever there was a human snake, that young fellow is one of the worst sort—poison from head to tail. Look out, brother, that he don't give you a touch of his fangs one of these days!"

"Frank is square as a die. I'd sooner doubt myself than him, for a truer friend never drew the breath of life!"

"All right, if you only think so. It's only my opinion against yours, and time will decide which one of us has come the closest to catching the turn."

"And that reminds me—was that black-browed rascal really trying to cheat us, as you charged him with doing?"

"Was he?" laughed Monte Jim, once more picking up the cards and swiftly running them over with his dextrous fingers. "Well, I should remark!"

"But how?" persisted Pennington. "I couldn't see anything wrong, and I watched him close as a cat watches a mouse."

"In your mind," laughed Monte Jim. "You're no gambler, my dear boy, and the sooner you swear off playing cards with men who make it their trade, the richer you'll find yourself. You've got the grit, but that is the only quality of a successful sport you can muster."

"Now you're getting hot, and that is something a true card-player never allows himself to indulge in. It's a luxury he can't afford. If he once gets rattled, it's all up with him for that deal, and if he don't draw off long enough to cool his temper, a national bank in his breeches-pocket couldn't keep him from going dead broke."

"Worse than that, if possible, your face is too transparent. It lets those who care to, read your faintest thought, before you can fairly do so yourself."

"Another failing; you never know when to quit. If you get lit on a particular card, you hold a grudge against it and try to force it to repay your losses, by winning for you. The more it kicks, the closer you stick to it. Good grit, no doubt, but of a sort that would wreck the smartest gambler in Christendom, if persisted in."

Alva Pennington plainly wished beneath this candid criticism of his weak points as a gambler.

"It's easy enough to talk—"

"When one has a subject which affords so many prominent points on which to stick a moral—just so," was the laughing interposition. "I'm telling you all this for your own good. You'll never make the fortune you crave by following the pasteboards, unless you make a radical change in your manner of play, and wear a

thick mask in addition. I tell you this as a professional, who has studied your methods closely enough to speak positively. If I am frank, it is because I feel a strong interest in your welfare, not from any wish to hurt your feelings in the slightest degree."

"Well, you can give me lessons, can't you?"

"Not enough to make you a true gambler, with all that title implies," was the grave response. "I can show you some of the tricks by which angels of your class have their wings clipped, if that will do you any good."

"Tell me how you caught the turn, then."

"By good eyes and a better memory. I had seen enough to convince me that Curly Kaine was putting up a job on you, and I knew enough of the fellow to feel sure that he had nerve enough to take long chances in hopes of getting square with me for the little rub I had given him. This was enough to set me on the watch, and I entered into that little discussion with you, to give him time and opportunity to work his turn."

"Even he did not detect how closely I watched him, and when he began that last deal, he felt confident that he held us both wholly at his mercy."

"I felt sure he was putting up splits on us, choosing your favorite cards as the base, and when the first came out, I had all the proof I wanted. He played the second of your pets to win, making my money pay your gains, killing two birds with one stone—encouraging you and spiting me. I held back and waited for the last turn, which I caught as he put it up."

"The cue papers said that queen, ten and six lay under the last winning card; and so they did, but with an extra queen of the same suit, from another pack, slipped in with the rest by Curly Kaine, when I was too busy arguing with you to notice the trick, as he flattered himself."

"This done, he rested easy in the belief that your stakes and mine were his to choose from, if he couldn't manage to rake 'em both in at one turn. He knew that you would bet to get even; knew that the queen was one of your pet cards, and consequently the one you would naturally select to back. He put up the turn so he could make you either win or lose, just as he pleased, which was to be decided by the way in which I placed my money, if I bet at all. If not, he would have been content with your stake. If I placed my chips with yours, you would be made to lose. If I went in direct opposition, you would be permitted to win, for the sake of hitting me. If I took the other chance, then we would both lose."

"It's easy enough to say this, but how can you prove it?" doubtfully demanded Pennington. "I don't believe any man could so completely command the run of the cards, even with a combination box."

"It does sound rather mixed up, I admit," laughed Monte Jim, "squaring the cards and cutting off all but the five bottom ones. A little ocular demonstration is worth all the talking a man can do in a month. Look here; I've set the cards up while talking, just as Curly Kaine did. You saw for yourself that I have not faced them until now, that I did not look at a card-face while apparently carelessly shuffling them; but all the same, here you can see the exact trick Curly tried to play us two this evening."

The card exposed was the nine-spot of hearts.

"You called ten, queen, six, as your choice, and as the cards will show, you had no possible chance to win on a call, though Curly could have made you seem the winner, if you had simply played the queen straight. I called it queen, six, ten, and I knew that I must win, if he drew the cards fairly. Because I knew he wouldn't, if he could help it, I gave him that warning. Now notice how the cards lay, and you'll see the point."

Moving them as though from a faro-box, Monte Jim showed in succession: queen of clubs, six of clubs, a second queen of clubs, and lastly the ten of diamonds.

"Now you see the little joker," he said, lightly, as Alva Pennington stared at the cards. "If you alone had bet, Curly would have drawn the queen, which won for the bank and lost for the players, then the six, taking with it the second queen, which would leave the ten-spot, and apparently everything about the turn perfectly honest. If I had not pinned him down so close, he would have taken the queen out with the exposed nine-spot, making the six lose for me, with the second queen as winning card, and the ten left in hock. That would have raked in both of our bets, and left us to mourn over the great uncertainties of card-playing."

The seeming impossibility was fully explained, and conceded though he was, Alva Pennington began to see that he still had something to learn of the intricacies of gambling as a fine art.

"If you think it impossible to draw two or more cards from the box at the same time, without being detected by some of the eyes which are watching the dealer so closely, then you know nothing of how cards may be sanded to stick together, or polished with wax to make them slip as desired in shuffling; or of the thousand and one arts and devices by which an accomplished

dealer can pluck those who buck against his game."

"A game may be dealt perfect on the square, so far as the cards are concerned, after being once placed in the box; yet a dealer can skin you even then, thanks to his skill in putting up splits while shuffling, and—"

Monte Jim abruptly paused in his speech, dropping one hand below the level of the table, while his blue eyes stared straight ahead, seemingly full in the face of Alva Pennington, for a moment. Then—with a motion swift as light itself, he raised a pistol and discharged it.

With a cry of angry rage and pain, Alva Pennington flung up his arms and fell heavily backward!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PROFESSOR SENDS MONTE JIM HIS CARD.

IF Medea Pennington was surprised by the abrupt address and sudden appearance of Will Rice as she emerged from the doorway of the house occupied by the dusky-browed woman whom Bismarck knew as "Hell and Brimstone," her fleshy escort was far more so, and after a much less agreeable fashion.

He had ample reasons of his own for not wishing to come into open collision with the ex-conductor, and he knew enough of the relations between Medea and Will to feel sure that the facts of the case would be told the latter, when his clear wits, aided by his personal knowledge of the parties concerned, would almost surely discover the plot, and burst forever the toils which were being so cunningly woven around the maiden.

It was very rough to be thus crossed just when all was working so smoothly, and a grating curse escaped the lips of the fat little professor as he skulked away in the darkness, resolved at least to save his own precious hide.

He did not go far, for he fled with his chin on shoulder, and saw that Will Rice had no intention of following him, even if he had noticed the presence of a second person in his amazement at recognizing the woman whom he loved so dearly issuing from the house of that evil character.

Halting just around the corner of the house, Professor King Smith stretched his fat neck until he could watch the young couple, but holding himself in readiness for instant and speedy flight in case Will Rice should undertake to follow and demand of him an account of his behavior.

He heard Rice speak of Helen Brinston, and his little pig-eyes glittered viciously, his teeth grated savagely, as his right hand clutched the butt of a revolver which was hidden beneath his tightly-fitting coat.

At that moment Will Rice stood very near to death's portals, for the devil was urging his disciple to commit murder; and the pistol was drawn, noiselessly cocked, leveled at the manly figure which was faintly outlined against a distant light in town. If he could have clearly distinguished the sights on his weapon—if he could have felt sure of his aim—the professor would have taken all other chances and have fired the death-shot. But the gloom was against him in this respect, and he reluctantly lowered his weapon.

He watched and listened in silence until he saw the couple move away in the direction of the hotel, then he stole around to the rear of the building and approaching the door, rapped upon it after a peculiar fashion. A faint rustle within, then silence. Again he rapped, and bending his head close to the key-hole, guardedly pronounced his own name.

Instantly the door flew open, and the regal figure of Helen Brinston barred his way as he attempted to enter.

"What are you doing here?" she sharply demanded, the light of the lamp showing the dark frown which contracted her brows. "Where did you leave that silly fool?"

Smith cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

"Let me inside—quick! The devil's to pay, red-hot!"

Startled by his words, she gave way, and he entered the building, closing the door behind him.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, harshly. "What blunder have you committed this time? Where's the girl?"

"Going back to the hotel, in company with a man who is amusing her with a full description of the character and reputation of a certain Hell and Brimstone—"

A white hand clutched his throat and cut his bitter speech short, while a jeweled dagger flashed before his eyes.

Though death seemed so near, he did not flinch. His little eyes met her flashing gaze, and he made no effort to avert the blow, though his hands were left at liberty.

A swift change came over the virago. She relaxed her fierce grasp, and replaced the gleaming weapon in its former hiding-place. Her voice was soft and soothing.

"You did not flinch or tremble. It was not your fault, or you would have showed some sign of fear when my knife was at your heart. I ask your pardon for my roughness; but you know how much we have at stake."

"That rule don't hold good with me, my dear,"

he said, readjusting his collar. "I love you so passionately that even death loses its terrors, coming from your hand."

An impatient gesture cut short his ardent speech.

"Drop that, if you please. What did you mean just now—?"

"What I said. Just as you shut the door behind us, the light fell across her face, and Will Rice recognized her. He called her by name, and expressed his surprise that she should be visiting the house of such an infamous creature. His words—not mine, dear," he hastily added, as her eyes flashed.

"You heard him? And then?"

"I slipped around the corner to ask your advice. I stopped long enough to hear him say that he would see her safe back to the hotel. I'd have dropped him for his insults to you, but there wasn't light enough to make a sure thing of it, and I concluded to wait another opportunity."

Her eyes were cast down. She seemed undecided what to do. King Smith watched her, his eyes filled with a hungry light that told how ardent was his love for the fallen creature.

Her indecision was of brief duration.

"Never mind. Let Will Rice talk. All he can tell her will not prevent the seed I have sowed from taking root and bearing fruit, if you only do your part of the work just as we planned it. She believes Monte Jim is the man she seeks, and all that is necessary now is to make sure that she never meets him face to face, alive. If she should—"

"What then?" cautiously asked Fatty Smith. "You know I am all in the dark, as yet."

"You know what you have to do, and that is sufficient for the present. You have only to obey orders—"

"And my reward?" he muttered, his eyes aglow.

"Shall be whatever you choose to ask when all is done," was the swift reply. "I will refuse you nothing."

"Nothing? Take care, Helen; if I do this job, I will expect you to pay my price!" he muttered, warningly.

"You have my word, and there is my hand on it."

Fatty Smith bent his head and pressed his lips to the fair member, as though the kiss would never end. A dark frown wrinkled her brow, a bitter smile curled her lip; but when his head was lifted all this was gone, and in its place dwelt a soft, loving look that caused his blood to leap madly in his veins.

"You shall not have to ask twice, my dear fellow; be sure of that. But now to business," and she took a package from a drawer, placing it in his hands. "Take this, and make good use of it at the earliest opportunity. The sooner your work is completed, the sooner you can claim your reward. And aside from that, there is no time to lose. If that girl meets him and has time to talk with him, all our work will go for nothing, for she'll get at the bottom facts with that timid boldness of hers—curse her!"

"If I can, I'll finish it up to-night."

"If! You must!" she grated, her face that of a beautiful demon. "Do it before morning, or never come near me again!"

"I will. I'd do double that for your sake, Helen!"

"Then go. There is time for them to meet to-night, unless you improve your time," she said, impatiently.

"If I should happen to find them together?"

"So much the worse for her!" was the swift, savage response. "Use that, at the first opportunity, no matter who else may suffer with him. You understand?"

With an audacity that astonished himself even more than it did her, Fatty Smith caught and drew her head down to a level with his own, then pressed his burning lips to hers.

With a celerity that told how much he feared her anger at this bold proceeding, he turned and darted out of the house without another word.

He heard the row at the Clipper Shades, but that did not hinder him from at once pressing on to the hotel where he knew his intended victim boarded; but just before he arrived at his destination, he was given ocular demonstration of the value of a few seconds, for Monte Jim was just aiding Alva Pennington into the building. A bitter curse escaped his lips as he recognized the two men.

"The devil's own luck is in it! One minute earlier and I could have done the job without danger to myself, or any one's suspecting from whence came the blow. How Helen would open on me if she only knew!"

He skulked into the deeper shadows, his brain working busily. His game was safely caged, for the present, but he did not know just how to get at it.

"It's early yet, and he'll come out again. I'll lay by for a few minutes, anyway, and wait," he muttered, leaning up against the building opposite the hotel.

Two figures passed before his vision, and as they came into the fan of light which spread out from the open door of the hotel, Fatty Smith shrunk back still deeper into the gloom, as

though fearful of being recognized by one or the other. He watched them enter the building, and drew a long breath of relief as they vanished from his sight.

"She's back again, and none too soon. Honest Giles would have had the whole town howling at my heels in a little more. And Rice—devil fly away with him!—if I could only catch him in company with Monte, when I send him my card with the compliments of Helen, soon to become Mrs. Professor King Smith, of Mandan!"

As these muttered syllables passed his lips, barely above his breath, the plotter fingered the package given him by Helen Brinston, tearing off the paper wrapping and tossing it to one side in a crumpled ball. Moving forward until he reached the edge of the light, he examined the object carefully, then again beat a retreat, as though satisfied all was correct and in readiness for use when the occasion should arise.

He stood gazing up at the second story of the hotel, where he could distinguish two lights burning.

"One of them is in his room, I reckon," he muttered, rubbing the tip of his nose thoughtfully. "If so, maybe he don't intend to come out again to-night. He had some one with him. Maybe a pigeon to pluck—for the fellow seemed unable to navigate alone. If so, there won't be a pin-feather left by the time Monte Jim lets up on him. They're up there, fingering the papers already, I'm open to bet big money; while I'm here, cooling my heels as I wait for Monte Jim to show up his beautiful mug—devil catch the fellow! hasn't he no more politeness than to keep me here waiting?"

His mutterings grew lower, until they finally ceased altogether; not because his dissatisfaction was growing less, but he was giving every thought to discovering a way by which he might solve the problem now presented for his consideration: how to carry out the orders given him by Helen Brinston, without bringing almost certain destruction on his own head.

If he could be certain that one—or which one—of those lighted windows opened into the room of Monte Jim, his work would be somewhat lightened. He had already noticed the sloping-roofed porch before the hotel, and knew that once on its top, he could command the person of any occupant of either chamber. But he knew, too, that there were still other rooms above stairs, any one of which might be the one rented by the man whom he had sworn to kill before the dawn of another day.

"If he don't show up in half an hour by the watch, I'll give it a try, anyhow!" was his decision, as he settled himself more comfortably in the narrow doorway.

He knew that this building was at present unoccupied, and that there was little probability that his presence would be noticed by any passer-by. Even if so, they would naturally suppose him another victim of Bismarck's bad whisky, and pass on about their own business.

Until his watch told off the period he had given Monte Jim in which to put in an appearance, Fatty Smith remained without word or motion; but then he arose, the first step in his work by this time thought out.

He passed around to the rear of the building against the front door of which he had been sitting, and aided by a plank which lay handy, he quickly gained a position on the low roof. There was a square front, carried up the full width of the building to a level with the saddle-boards, and Fatty Smith "cooned" his way along the ridge-pole until the front was reached, peering eagerly across to the lighted windows.

One of these appeared to be unoccupied, at present, and was in reality the chamber rented by Medea Pennington. Into the other room, the spy could only obtain a partial view, from his present position. With a keen look up and down the street, to make sure that there were no curious eyes watching his suspicious maneuvers, the professor lay flat upon his stomach and drew himself along the flat-topped front, until he reached the extreme end.

It was difficult, trying work, but the end proved his reward, for he could just catch a glimpse of two men seated at a table in the chamber apparently playing cards. More—he recognized the man whom he had sworn by his love for Helen Brinston to slay before the dawn of another day—Monte Jim.

For a moment or two, Fatty Smith fingered his revolver, as though tempted to risk a shot at the dashing sport from where he then was; but the notion was quickly banished. His position was too precarious in itself to insure a dead shot, even had the light been more favorable and the distance between himself and his intended victim much less.

"It's got to be a clean job," he muttered, as he painfully "crawlished" from his ticklish perch back to the roof. "Monte is a cyclone on wheels when once he gets started, and if I don't down him first off, it's a mighty poor bridegroom my remains would make for the fair Helen!"

Scrambling along the roof, Fatty Smith dropped to the ground, then once more took up his position in front of the hotel. But his gaze was

no longer riveted on the lighted window. He knew that Monte Jim was settled for the night, now that he was busy with the pasteboards. He knew, too, that there was only one point from which he could strike his blow without insuring his own death—either at the hands of Monte Jim, before he died, or by lynch law when his crime should be discovered, as it surely must if he dared to enter the hotel.

"I've got to get up there some way," he mused, scratching his head, dubiously, as he scanned the porch opposite. "Not but that I could do it easy enough, for I ain't too fat to play 'coon if I do look like it—but suppose some durn fool was to come along just as I was trying to make the rifle?"

It was an unpleasant idea, but Fatty Smith knew that he must run the risk. He dare not lose this opportunity by waiting for a more favorable one. The prize depending on his success, was far too glorious, in his eyes, for that.

Twice he left his ambush, his mind made up to scale one of the corner posts which supported the gently sloping roof above the veranda; once he had even clasped the column which lay deepest in the shadows, and taken the first upward spring—only to drop hastily down again and retreat, alarmed by the approach of human beings.

But still he was not discouraged, and again making sure that the street in his immediate proximity was deserted, he clasped the column and climbed up it, grasping the stout railing over his head, throwing all of his strength and dexterity into the effort, and dragging himself over the barrier to drop in safety on the roof, panting and trembling with the strain.

Not for long did he remain thus, however. His nerves were not readily put out of trim; he was a graduate in crime, and this was not the first time he had contemplated the shedding of blood.

Creeping along on his hands and knees, testing each board before he trusted his weight upon it, lest it should give out a warning creak, Fatty Smith soon gained the lighted window beyond which his game was seated, little suspecting the peril which threatened him in the fancied security of his own chamber. Carefully the spy raised his head until he could peer in at one corner of the window, dropping back again as he recognized Monte Jim.

The window was down, and he feared to make any attempt at lifting it or cutting out a pane of glass, for Monte Jim was seated so as to face the window, and could hardly avoid detecting any such maneuver.

Producing the article given him by Helen Brinston, Fatty Smith held it so that the light from within fell upon it, revealing a small metal bomb, out of which protruded a fuse.

His judgment told him the fuse was too long, since the intended explosion must be almost instantaneous after the deadly missile left his hand, if he wished perfect success, and taking out his knife, Fatty Smith cut off several inches, calculating the remainder to a nicety.

This done, he held the bomb between his knees while he produced a couple of handkerchiefs and a pair of gloves from his pockets. These articles he used to muffle up his left hand and wrist, for in order to avoid the slightest chance of miscarriage in his dastardly attempt at assassination, he was resolved to first shatter the glass of the window, then hurl his deadly missile through the opening, straight at Monte Jim.

When his hand and arm were protected to the best of his ability, Fatty Smith stole one more cautious glance at his unsuspecting victim, then crouching low down, made a cover of his hands and body to shut in all light, as he struck a match with which to ignite the fuse.

This he succeeded in doing, to his own satisfaction, then once more raised himself on his knees, casting a swift glance up and down the street, to see that the coast was clear.

Not a person was to be seen, and he touched off the fuse, waiting long enough to make sure that it was well lighted, then suddenly rose up before the window, drawing back his hand to shatter the glass—when he saw Monte Jim level a pistol.

He struck the glass, then cast the bomb, straight and true!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PROFESSOR CROSSES THE DIVIDE.

UNLUCKILY for the complete success of the bold attempt at assassination which Fatty Smith was bribed to make, Monte Jim caught a glimpse of his face beyond the window when he took a final glance inside before lighting the fuse which was attached to the hand grenade, and though he did not suspect an assault after that particular fashion, the dashing sport prepared to defend himself in case anything worse than robbery was intended by the prowler on the porch roof.

He saw the muffled hand raised to shatter the glass, and whipping forth his revolver he made a snap-shot that rung out just as the window-pane was dashed in.

There was no time to warn Alva Pennington,

and as the window was almost directly behind him, the muzzle of the pistol almost touched his face as it discharged its contents, the flame fairly blackening and scorching his skin, causing him to start backward, tipping over his chair and rolling heavily to the floor, believing himself the victim of an outrageous attempt at assassination on the part of Monte Jim.

Swift as were his motions, Monte Jim was too late to entirely frustrate the murderous scheme of the midnight prowler. At the same instant that his pistol spoke, the muffled hand fell upon the glass, dashing out a couple of the small lights, then, with his right hand, Fatty Smith hurled the grenade straight at the breast of the card-sharp.

The fuse was almost burned to the metal as it left his hand, and he dared not wait an instant lest some of the ragged missiles should overtake him in his flight and forever deprive him of the luscious reward which had been promised him for effectually removing Monte Jim from the stage of life. Turning, he made a wild leap over the railing, alighting heavily on his feet, but without material injury.

Monte Jim saw the motion which hurled the bomb at his person, but before he could make another move the missile struck fairly on the table, bouncing across it, to be caught in the hand which was instinctively interposed.

Fate willed that the burning fuse should be uppermost, and at once realizing the nature of the peril which threatened him, Monte Jim hurled the missile back through the window as he leaped to his feet.

Almost instantly there came a loud explosion—a moment later a wild, piercing scream of agony the most excruciating—both coming from the gloom into which the audacious assassin had plunged.

Monte Jim did not hesitate an instant after leaping to his feet, but with the revolver still clasped in his right hand in readiness for use, he made one mighty leap that carried him over the intervening table and almost to the window. A second leap—a dexterous use of his feet which carried both sashes from their fastenings and landed the card-sharps on the roof of the veranda—still a third, taking him in safety to the ground and close beside a writhing, moaning heap of humanity.

Confused by what he believed was a dastardly attempt on his life, Alva Pennington staggered to his feet, blinded by the burning powder, indistinctly making out the form of his assailant in seeming flight by way of the window. An angry cry escaped his lips, as he dashed one hand across his smarting eyes, and fumbled for his pistol:

"Coward, come back and face me like a man!"

He saw that Monte Jim leaped through the window without paying any attention to his challenge, and fairly boiling over with rage, he tore open the door and rushed headlong down the steep stairs, through the office and out-doors.

He caught a glimpse of a man kneeling beside another, and recognizing Monte Jim, rushed up to him, and thrust the muzzle of his revolver almost against his temple, only to have it caught by a hand that twisted the weapon from his grasp as readily as though he had been no more than an infant.

"Curse you, Monte Jim!" he panted, his words hardly distinguishable for a choking rage. "What did you shoot at me for? I'll kill you for that, like a cowardly dog!"

"You simmer down, young fellow!" sternly retorted the card-sharp, rising to his feet with a swift glance around him at the rapidly-gathering crowd. "I never fired at you, but at this cowardly whelp who threw a bomb through the window at my head. I sent it back, and I reckon he's got his last dose of medicine through it, too!"

The loud explosion, added to the pistol-shot and the wild screech which escaped the lips of Fatty Smith as he was stricken down by his own missile, had attracted considerable attention, and already quite a little group was gathered about the spot where the fat little professor lay in his own gore, feebly moaning, apparently insensible to the countless questions which fell from eager lips on all sides.

This sharp interchange of words between Pennington and Monte Jim drew their attention to those worthies, and already it became evident that the unsavory reputation which, justly or wrongfully, clung around the card-sharp was working him injury and ranging public sentiment against him.

Monte Jim was keen enough to see this, and more—he saw that there were a number of the Clipper Shades's "heelers" in the crowd, whose hints were rapidly growing into open threats.

"Whar's the marshal? 'Rest the dirty cuss that goes to blowin' up his betters!" cried out a voice from the darkness.

"Who is it? Who did it? What's the rumpus anyway?" demanded a clear, stern voice, as Joe Kinney, the marshal of Bismarck at that time, pushed his way through the thickening crowd, instinctively pausing directly before Monte Jim.

"Monte Jim done it," added the accusing

voice from the friendly darkness. "He butchered a pore devil who wasn't sayin' a darn word nuthin' to him."

"Run him in, Joe, or give up your badge!"

"It's a bloomin' shame of a card-sharp like him ken run the town to his own likin', an' not a bloody man in it durst say I, yes or no to him when he gits his war-paint on!"

"A hemp neck-tie is what he wants the most!"

"An' we're jest the lads what kin fit it onto him!"

"And there isn't a better time than right now!"

In swift succession these menacing speeches came from out the gloom, in no single instance from men who could be recognized by either the marshal or the man whom they were directed against.

In vain Monte Jim turned toward each quarter as the wordy missiles exploded. He could not catch the owner of the lips through which they were projected.

"You're doing a heap of yelping, but you're mighty careful to keep your faces in the dark," he said, scornfully. "If there is a dog among you all that has the spirit of a coyote, step out and accuse me to my face."

"You go easy, Monte," interposed the marshal, sternly, his pistol drawn and cocked; "I'm running this circus."

"That's all right, Kinney," was the placable reply. "You have a right to lip in, and as an orderly citizen, I'll give you all the light I can shed on this affair. But when a lot of mangy curs set up their yelping at my heels, I've got a right to make them put up or shut up."

"That's all right enough, but you are accused of killing this fellow—"

"Who accuses me?" was the sharp interruption.

"Do you deny it?"

"Look here!" excitedly cried Alva Pennington, pushing forward. "There was only one shot fired, and that was intended for me! Look at my face—his powder burned it—I only escaped the lead by dodging. If any one else was hit, it was by accident, and by the bullet intended by him for me!"

"What have you to say to that, Monte?" demanded Kinney.

"Just this; Mr. Pennington is mistaken," was the calm response. "That his face may have got a bit scorched when I burned powder, may all be; but that I intended him any injury, is not correct. I shot at a man who was breaking in the window of my room, up yonder. I saw he was raising something to throw at me, and I took a snap shot at him. He did throw—a bomb of some sort, that struck me in the breast. I caught it up and pitched it out of the window again. It exploded, and must have caught the dirty scoundrel just as he jumped to the ground. There you have the whole story in a nutshell!"

Impressed by the straightforward manner in which Monte Jim gave this account, Kinney stooped over the prostrate figure, just as Honest Giles turned the light of a lamp upon it.

"Fatty Smith, by all that's holy!" exclaimed the marshal, as he recognized the blood-stained countenance of the fat little professor.

A faint groan broke from the lips of the wounded man, and his eyes opened, staring wildly around him.

The flickering light was sufficient to reveal the terrible nature of his wounds to all eagerly crowded around.

As fate willed it, the grenade had struck the ground almost directly beneath the professor, as he struggled to rise from his hands and knees after leaping from the roof of the veranda, horribly mangle his legs and body as it exploded, inflicting wounds that must certainly cause death in a very short space of time. Indeed, the marvel was that he ever drew a breath of life after the explosion.

As his wildly wandering gaze rested upon the pale, handsome countenance of the card-sharp, it became fixed, and a cry of mingled rage and anguish issued from his bloody lips.

"He did it—he murdered me—Monte Jim!" he gasped, pointing one trembling hand at the dashing sport.

"Kill the bloody cuss! String him up!" cried the voice from out the darkness, to be followed by a chorus of similar exclamations from those who had no cause for loving the man.

Joe Kinney rose up, pistol in hand, scowling around on the impatiently surging crowd, his voice sharp and stern:

"Enough of that, gents! I'm running this show, I'd have you to understand—and when I talk, I mean business!"

Silence followed, for the sturdy marshal was well known to be a bad man when once aroused.

"He butchered me—Monte Jim!" repeated Fatty Smith, the burning lust for revenge seeming to give him strength to fight back death for the time. "I was quietly walking along—minding my own business—when he threw that infernal machine. I just—caught a glimpse—of his face—then it went off—and you see me! Avenge me, boys, or—I'll haunt you! Oh, curses on you, Monte Jim!"

In painful gasps the terrible accusation was made, and as the final words passed his lips,

Fatty Smith dropped back, seemingly in the last throes of a frightful death.

Pale as a corpse, but otherwise showing not the slightest trace of agitation, Monte Jim listened to this charge, which he well knew meant his death, unless it could be plainly disproved, then moved a step nearer the dying wretch, his voice calm and even as he spoke:

"See here, Fatty; you're dying, man. Would you pass from life with your last breath uttering a lie as foul as that? Be a white man now, if you never were before. Tell the plain truth. Didn't you throw that grenade into my room, with the intention of killing me? Didn't I take a snap shot at you, as you broke through the window? Didn't you jump to the ground from that porch, only to be caught by your own bomb as I threw it out of the window to save myself and Mr. Pennington?"

"You lie! You murdered me!" gasped the dying wretch, in tones so husky that they were barely articulate.

Again there came an ugly murmur from the crowd, and Joe Kinney did not raise his voice again to check it. Instead, he looked darkly at the accused man, plainly believing the charge given by the dying man.

At this moment a broad-shouldered, neatly dressed man pushed his way through the crowd and confronted the sport.

"Perhaps I can throw a little light on this matter, gentlemen," uttered Frank Lisle, for he the new-comer was. "Not ten minutes ago I separated from the poor fellow who lies there, weltering in his blood. We were then in front of the place called the Clipper Shades. He stopped me to request a light for his cigar, from the one I was smoking. We were standing in the full light from the open doors of the saloon, and I could not possibly be mistaken in the person. I had a passing acquaintance with him, having been introduced to him last evening, and we talked a little together, about the row at the Shades, in which I was unluckily mixed up."

"We parted, and I saw him come this way. I was about to follow, for I board here, when I heard the explosion and saw the light. Mr. Smith could not have had time to climb up that porch and make any attempt at murder. I'm willing to take my oath to that effect."

A low, agonized groan came from the bleeding mass, and with the last remnant of his strength, Fatty Smith lifted his body upright, shaking one clinched fist at the pale sport, as he gasped in painful jerks:

"I die—a murder d man! Hell's hottest curses—on your head—Monte Jim! Avenge—my death—boys! Ah-h!"

He fell forward upon his face, dead!

Again that ominous muttering—the growing cry for blood! And then, rising clear and sharp came the words:

"Do your duty, Joe Kinney! Demand his arms, and make him surrender to meet the charge which is brought against him!"

"Better than that!" came another voice. "Hitch a rope around his neck and string him up! A dog's life he has led—let him die like a dog!"

"Come and take my tools, if you think you're men enough!" cried Monte Jim, leaping back with cocked revolvers.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MEDEA PENNINGTON CAPTURES MONTE JIM.

A SINGLE man bidding defiance to over two-score—but such a man!

Tall, broad-shouldered, trim-waisted, with the limbs and torso of an athlete; handsome in face as a demigod. He was very pale, but even his worst enemies could not believe that this was the effect of fear. They knew that if crowded to the wall, Monte Jim would fight to the death. In conquering him they would gain no bloodless victory; and the boldest among them all hesitated before pressing against that stern front.

Night though it was, and faint the light that was shed on the scene by the flickering lamp held in the hands of Honest Giles, they could distinguish the resolute glitter which filled those dark blue eyes; could see that those white hands trembled not as they clasped the butts of the leveled revolvers; and anticipating the twin spouts of flaming death which they knew those dark tubes could vomit forth at will of the card-sharp who held them, the first movement of the crowd which had so recently cried aloud for the blood of Monte Jim, was to increase, rather than to contract the size of the circle.

"Keep your fingers out of the fires, gents, and you'll not be so apt to get burnt," coolly uttered the card-sharp, and there was even a trace of railery in his tones that stung like the crack of a whip. "There's only one man standing in my boots, but if you crowd him too close, I reckon you'll think he carries a gatling in each hand and a mule battery or two in reserve to draw to!"

"Now don't you be a fool, Monte," said Joe Kinney, advancing a step and making a placable motion with his unarmed hand as the card-sharp turned the frowning muzzle of one revolver upon him. "You can't buck against the whole crowd!"

"You don't want to put too much money on

that, old man, or you may get left," was the cool retort. "As for the fool part, that's just what I'm trying to steer clear of. I'd be the moldiest idiot out of an insane asylum, were I to surrender and give up my tools in response to such howls as came from the cowardly rabble, just now!"

"But you can't fight us all, Monte."

"I can try it, Joe. Maybe I won't make a very great success at it, but those who can count the cost, when I'm down for good and all, will be pretty apt to think they have seen the worth of their money. That's the size of my hand, old man!"

"Now you just want to listen to me, Monte Jim," retorted the marshal, plainly growing irritated by the unreasonable obstinacy exhibited by the card-sharp. "There's been a mighty tough charge made against you, and as a sworn officer of the law, I've got to run you in. You must give up your pops and surrender. I pledge you my word that you shall have a fair show for your money—"

"From that dirty gang at your back?" scornfully interposed Monte Jim, his glittering eyes ranging swiftly over the semicircle, where he could recognize many personal enemies. "There's no use wasting any more chin-music, Joe. You may take me dead, but never alive. It's all a put-up job on the part of Curly Kaine and his heelsers, to run me out of the way, in payment for my making him and his ent dirt in his own roost, this very night. If you or they want my tools, come and take 'em!"

At this bold defiance, a little thrill of mingled admiration and fear ran through the crowd, for they knew that Joe Kinney could not recede from the position he had taken, and not one among them all could doubt the perfect earnestness of Monte Jim. And, Black Sheep though he was called, the dauntless manner in which he faced such overwhelming odds, made him more than one well-wisher out of those who had until then looked upon him coolly as a sort of pariah.

Joe Kinney saw that Monte Jim had him lined, while his own pistol hung at his side, muzzle downward. He knew that at his first motion to attack, the man at bay would surely fire, and with such odds against him, he would shoot to kill, selling his life for the greatest possible price. Yet he could not show the white feather under the circumstances, and his muscles grew tight as he prepared to make a leap that might land him in eternity—when there came a most unlooked-for interruption in the shape of a woman's figure which glided between them, with arms outstretched appealingly, first to one, then to the other.

It was Medea Pennington, who, together with Will Rice, had been drawn from the parlor by the loud explosion and excited cries which followed the discovery of the frightfully mangled body of Professor King Smith, weltering in his blood.

From the doorway she had seen and heard all up to this point. Even she could not help but see that a wild tragedy was impending, and her fear lest Monte Jim—Lloyd Pennington, as she firmly believed—should be slain before she could perform the sacred duty with which she had been charged by her remorseful father as he lay upon his death-bed, conquered her womanly timidity, and deftly slipping from the reassuring grasp of the ex-conductor, she rapidly interposed between the two armed men.

"For shame, men!" she cried, her voice ringing out clear as a bell, as she proudly confronted the muttering crowd, her glorious eyes flashing with indignant scorn. "Fifty men on one! Is that your boasted love of fair play?"

"Your pardon, miss," said Kinney, with a respectful bow, as he doffed his hat before the proud beauty. "It's only one man against Monte; and that's me—the sworn marshal of this burg. He's charged with murder, and if he don't surrender quietly, I'm in duty bound to take him the best way I can."

"Clear that mob away, and I'll surrender to you, old man," coolly put in the Black Sheep of Bismarck. "But all Curly Kaine's gang can't take me alive."

"You will surrender to me, Lloyd Pennington," said Medea, stepping closer and gently closing her white fingers over the muzzles of the leveled weapons, looking him straight in the eyes with a gaze that seemed to burn. "I pledge you my word of honor that you shall have a fair trial. There shall be no mob rule—no lynch law in your case, if you yield quietly."

"I appeal to you, gentlemen," she added, turning her magnetic eyes upon the wondering spectators. "As gentlemen—as honest men—I ask your aid and support in this matter!"

"Fair play is a jewel, and I am one to back your words with tongue or tools!" cried Will Rice, striding to her side.

"An' I'm a swill-fed hog of I ain't in the same boat!" exclaimed Honest Giles, pushing forward, lamp in one hand and a huge revolver in the other. "I never go back on a boarder, and them what wouldn't do the same, ain't fit to come to the second table!"

A shout arose from the crowd, but it was very different in its nature from that which sent Monte Jim leaping back on guard. It

came from the lips of the whiter men in the crowd, whose sympathies were awakened by the action of Medea Pennington and her two backers.

"I surrender to you, lady!" said Monte Jim, lowering the hammers of his pistols and then releasing them.

Another cry—this time from the baser element, who saw that the man they feared even more than they hated, was disarmed and apparently wholly at their mercy—and with a rush they moved forward—only to shrink back again as Medea Pennington wheeled upon them, cocking the weapons she had just taken from the card sharp. Her eyes were flashing, her face was filled with mingled anger and scorn as she cried:

"Keep your distance, cowards, or I fire!"

"Fair play or a fight, gentlemen!" supplemented Will Rice warningly. "Monte Jim surrendered to this lady, on her pledge that he should receive fair play. If you try to break her promise, some of you will suffer, sure as there's a Heaven above us! Fair warning! Another step nearer, and we shoot!"

Joe Kinney and a dozen other men faced in the same direction, with ready weapons, and the evil element of the mob saw plainly enough that the tide was turned against them, that their chance of putting the Black Sheep of Bismarck forever out of the way, had slipped them for that time.

"Take him into the hotel!" whispered Medea to Will Rice. "Guard him there as you would guard your own life. He must speak—he must tell whether or no he is the man I seek!"

She turned once more toward the crowd, speaking rapidly:

"Gentlemen, you may think it strange conduct on my part—even unmaidenly—but when you know all, you will see why I could not remain quiet while that man was being murdered. I know that the poor wretch who lies yonder cold in death, was the bitter enemy of the gentleman whom you call Monte Jim. I know that he repeatedly threatened his life—and I believe that he made a dastardly attempt this night to carry out those threats.

"You all heard the account Monte Jim gave of the affair. If it was true, as I firmly believe, there may be some traces left by the assassin on the top of the porch. Let your marshal and Mr. Rice make thorough examination. If none is to be found, then I will surrender Monte Jim to the lawful authorities to stand his trial for murder!"

"I ask nothing better," quietly uttered Monte Jim.

"It's a square deal, gents!" commented Kinney. "You can't ask anything straighter. I am free to own up that I don't cotton to Monte worth a cent, but all the same I am bound to see that he gets a fair show for his money.

"Half a dozen of you keep a watch over the door yonder to see that Monte don't try to make a break for it. If he should, and your legs ain't spry enough to capture him, I reckon there's some among you able to hit a target his size!"

Not a voice was raised in opposition to the turn matters had taken. Those who sought the death of the Black Sheep of Bismarck, with or without reason, were afraid to utter their sentiments, while the honest portion of the crowd only wanted to learn the truth to satisfy justice.

Medea and Honest Giles escorted Monte Jim into the hotel, while lights were procured for Kinney and Rice, by the aid of which they were to carry on the investigation set afoot by the quick-witted maiden.

A ladder was procured, by means of which the two men, who led in the investigation on which depended the life or death of Monte Jim, carefully mounted to the roof of the veranda.

Throwing the full light of their lanterns upon the roof, as they stood at its edge, they looked keenly for sign.

At first they saw nothing more suspicious than the fragments of the shattered window-sashes, and bits of broken glass which littered the roof; but then keen-eyed Joe Kinney stooped and threw the light from his lantern full upon a bit of fuse, lying in a shallow crack between two boards, and close beside it was the end of a blackened match.

The two men interchanged quick glances, as the marshal bent lower to secure the tell-tale articles; but not a word passed their lips that could be caught by the eagerly-listening and breathlessly-watching crowd below. And in the same silence, Will Rice pointed out two marks where a match had plainly been recently drawn across one of the weather-boards.

"It looks as though Monte was giving it to us straight, after all!" muttered Kinney guardedly to his companion. "It's all fresh sign, but it ain't quite enough to tell the hull yarn in itself. Let's look further."

Slowly and carefully they searched the roof of the veranda inch by inch, from one end to the other. And still another bit of evidence was discovered by the eagle-eyed marshal, in the shape of a black cloth-covered button to which hung a tiny fragment of cloth.

Nothing else was discovered on the roof, and they descended the ladder, closely examining

each pillar which lent support to the roof. On one corner post, there were fresh marks where the old paint had been rubbed off; but that might easily have been the result of accident, any time within the week, and they did not dwell long over it.

"Now we'll take a look at the corpus, I reckon!" muttered Kinney, leading the way without answering any of the eager questions which were showered upon them.

Selecting a number of men whom he knew he could trust, he formed them in a circle around the mangled body of Fatty Smith, then knelt down beside him, button in hand, while Rice held his lantern so that its light fell upon the gruesome sight.

Silently Joe Kinney matched the button with those which still remained upon the tightly-buttoned coat, clinching his teeth tightly as he saw they exactly matched. More—he discovered the very spot from which it had been torn, when the fat little professor made that desperate effort to draw his weighty person over the railing on the veranda roof.

Next, he noticed the left hand, which was still tightly bandaged, and gently loosening the knots, he unwound the blood-stained cloths, pricking his fingers on a triangular bit of glass as he did so. But it was not that alone which caused his sudden start, and drew that ejaculation from his lips.

The light of the lantern fell upon a bullet-pierced hand, and the final clue was discovered!

Fatty Smith was the assassin, and died with a lie on his lips! A lie by which he hoped to be avenged, even in death!

"That settles it!" exclaimed Kinney, rising to his feet. "Gents, we all owe the lady our thanks, for preventing us from murdering an innocent man! Monte Jim told the plain truth, and Fatty Smith died with a foul lie hot on his lips! He tried to murder Monte, and got caught in his own trap!"

"An assertion easily enough made, but what we want is the proof on which it is founded," sharply uttered a tall man, as he stepped closer to the marshal.

"What is your mighty interest in the matter?" Kinney demanded, as he stared into the face of Frank Lisle.

"You heard the evidence I offered, a bit ago," was the calmer reply. "I believe this poor devil had no time to make any such attempt, but if he did, then I owe Monte Jim an apology for the words I uttered in my excitement."

"That's square talk," commented Alva Pennington, ranging himself alongside of his friend. "I want to see bottom, too, for if Monte Jim really shot at that fellow as he said, then he didn't try to blow out my brains, as I fully believed and said. What discoveries have you made?"

Kinney recognized the reasonableness of this demand, and briefly made known all that they had discovered; the bit of fuse, freshly cut off; the burnt match and the marks where it had been twice struck on the weather-boarding close beside the window which opened into the chamber of Monte Jim; the bandaged hand, from the folds of which fell a bit of glass; the button which matched those still remaining on the coat; and lastly the bullet-pierced hand.

"It's a strong case, I must admit!" muttered Lisle.

"So strong that I've only got this much to say: unless some one of you bring a charge of murder against Monte, I'm not going to trouble myself any further in the matter!" said Kinney, turning away from the mangled corpse and entering the hotel, seeking the parlor, where he briefly announced his discoveries and his determination to drop the affair for good.

"And I, my dear sir!" said Frank Lisle, advancing with extended hand, "must ask your pardon. Though I simply told the truth, or what I felt was the truth, I now realize my error. The scoundrel must have found time to make his attempt on your life, though I did not think it possible."

Monte Jim stared him full in the face for a moment, then turned away without noticing the proffered hand. But he grasped that of Alva Pennington instead, with a soft laugh, saying:

"Do you still think I meant to murder you, old fellow?"

"I think that I've made an infernal idiot of myself!" cried Pennington, as he warmly pressed the hand Monte Jim.

CHAPTER XXV.

MEDEA PENNINGTON TELLS A STORY.

"WELL, it was rather innocent on your part to believe that a man of my caliber, who, so to speak, was born with a pistol in his fist, could miss the size of your head across a table, and then take the chances of jumping through a second-story window instead of sending you that route," laughed Monte Jim, giving Pennington's hand a parting squeeze that almost made the bones crack; then, turning toward Frank Lisle, his voice and manner in startling contrast to what they had been but a moment before:

"As for you and your little mistakes, Mr. Frank Lisle, the less I see of the one and hear

of the other, the less liable am I to be arrested for assault and battery."

"Do you mean to threaten me, sir?" demanded Lisle, his eyes flashing, his brows contracting heavily.

"I never utter threats—in the presence of a lady," was the cold response. "I don't think it will be very difficult for you to imagine why I refuse your hand, but if there should happen to be any little point which you fail to perfectly comprehend, I shall only be too happy to elucidate, any hour of the twenty-four, after the present one. Good-evening."

"I'll recall your pledge, Monte Jim—if you escape being hung for murder, and do not run away before I can find you again," coolly retorted Lisle.

He glanced from one to another of those present, but on neither face could he detect the faintest wish for his remaining in defiance of the very pointed intimation from Monte Jim that his room would be far preferable to his company, even Alva Pennington avoiding his look. With a careless nod to all in general he turned on his heel and left the room.

"There's bad blood under his smooth hide, or I'm a liar!" muttered Joe Kinney, in a voice intended for Monte Jim alone.

"More than there will be after I have had a little private conversation with the gentleman," replied the card-sharp, after the same guarded fashion.

"It's all on the level between you and me, then, Monte?"

"If you say so, most assuredly."

"I only done what I thought was my duty. Of course I couldn't let you bluff me clean down, and if it hadn't been for the young lady I reckon one or the other, if not both of us, would be turned toes up before this!"

"And I, Mr. Kinney," suddenly uttered a soft voice, as Medea Pennington glided between them, "must ask your pardon for the strange manner in which I usurped your office. I felt sure Mr. Ince could not be guilty of such a dastardly crime; but all the same, if his guilt had been positive, I must have interfered to save his life long enough for him to clear up a most perplexing mystery."

Joe Kinney was no ladies' man, and he blushed furiously beneath that apologetic smile and gentle touch which rested on his arm. Just what he did or said he could never recall with anything like satisfactory clearness, for the next thing he remembered was striding swiftly down the street, hat in hand, letting the cool breeze dry his heated brow.

Monte Jim was on the point of following him when Medea, her voice grave, her face sad, checked him.

"Not yet, Mr. Ince, please. I have a story to relate that, if I mistake not, deeply concerns you. As a personal favor, I beg of you to remain and listen."

Alva Pennington started at her words, casting a swift glance from her face to that of the gambler, then advancing:

"You have recognized him then, Medea?"

She turned quickly upon him, her eyes gleaming as she uttered in a swift, startling tone:

"You know, then, and yet you left me in ignorance?"

"I suspected, but only this very night. In fact, this gentleman was answering my questions when that dastard made his attempt at murder. I haven't had a chance to speak since. But you won't go into it to-night? It's growing late—"

Medea turned imploringly toward Monte Jim, who said:

"I am entirely at your disposal, Miss Pennington. Night and day are the same to me, but you—had you not better seek some repose before attempting to do more? Will not to-morrow answer just as well?"

"I dare not wait!" was the quick, nervous reply. "My vow forbids it. And unless you positively refuse to listen—"

"You saved my life, when those fellows had me cornered, Miss Pennington, and it is yours to do with as you see fit. You have only to command, and I will obey."

Will Rice, who had been unwillingly forced to listen to these swift interchanges, now caught at his opportunity to bid Medea good-night, only to be cut short by the lady.

"You must not go yet, Mr. Rice," she said, positively. "Though the story I have to tell does not intimately concern you, the services you have so generously rendered me this night embolden me to beg your attendance to the end."

A surly growl from Alva Pennington told how little he relished this prospect, but Will Rice was too deeply in love with Medea to slight or refuse her earnestly spoken wish, and with a low bow he resumed his seat on the lounge.

"What business is it of his?" growled Pennington. "This is a family affair, and we can surely get along without any outsiders!"

"Cousin, Mr. Rice is my friend. He has heard part of the story I have to tell, and has been of such service to me that I give him the right to remain? Do you still object, sir?"

Alva Pennington looked very much as though

he would like to object in a fashion still more emphatic than by simple words, but something in those clear, gleaming eyes warned him not to go too far. With an ugly look from the corner of his eyes toward the ex-conductor, he sunk back in a chair.

Medea followed his example, as far as seating herself was concerned, motioning Monte Jim to do the same. In silence he obeyed, and for a brief space there was perfect silence, Medea gazing at the floor, as though puzzled how to begin.

Not for long, however. Then she spoke rapidly:

"When you were facing those men who were calling aloud for your life, I addressed you by a name different from that which you gave me night before last, on the train. Will you tell me frankly, without reservation, which name is rightfully yours? Are you James Ince, or are you Lloyd Pennington?"

"James Ince is the name I go by, ma'am, when the boys wish to be extra polite; every day, I'm Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck," was the quiet response.

"But is that your rightful name? Were you never called Lloyd Pennington?" persisted Medea, eying him closely.

A faint smile swept over the handsome countenance of the card-sharp, but there was little delay in giving his answer:

"Since you pin me down to sober facts ma'am, I'll own that I was once called Lloyd Pennington."

"The son of Craig Pennington, and nephew of Stephen Pennington, of Chicago? Half-brother to my cousin, here?" persisted the young woman, as though resolved to make no mistake.

Monte Jim bowed silently.

With a low sigh that was not altogether one of relief, Medea Pennington leaned back in her chair, her eyes once more drooping, the transitory flush abandoning her cheeks. Her tone sounded hard and forced, as though she found the story a very difficult and trying one to utter; but not once did she falter or pause, save when interrupted by one of her auditors.

"When my poor father lay dying, he called me to his bedside, and told me a terrible story, bidding me spare no pains in searching for one whom he had bitterly wronged in the days gone by; to spend money like water, if need be, but to never abandon the quest until I had found Lloyd Pennington, or become positively assured that he was dead."

"When I did discover him, if living, I was to tell him the whole truth, without a single reservation, no matter how hard I might find it bore upon me to say the criminating words."

"In obedience to that sacred vow, given when the dews of death were on his brow, with his cold hand in mine, his painfully eager look upon my face, I have spent six months in hunting for Lloyd Pennington, only finding him this night. And now, though the confession comes bitter as gall on my lips, I will tell you what that dying man told me with his last few breaths of life."

"Once more, Miss Pennington, I beg that you will postpone this revelation to which you allude," said Monte Jim, earnestly. "You are not fit—you have been tried far too severely already. Surely, one more day will not matter."

"You are kind, but I must go on. I dare not falter. I would see the reproachful face of my dead father—no, no! I must finish my story now, if it kills me!"

A brief pause, then she resumed:

"Craig and Stephen Pennington were half-brothers, and partners in what every one believed was a most prosperous business. They were accounted among the richest merchants in the city, and their name was good for almost any amount on 'Change."

"Lloyd Pennington, son of Craig, by his first wife, was one of the head clerks in the store, though then quite young. He was a little wild, rumor said, but otherwise he was deemed a model of honor, and in the absence of the partners, he frequently took entire charge of the business. This fact told heavily against him when the blow fell."

"It came one day like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky."

"Stephen Pennington unexpectedly returned from a journey East, and he had scarcely been at the office an hour, before a dispatch was sent summoning his partner, Craig Pennington. He came promptly, and the partners held a long consultation with locked doors. When they opened, it was to admit Lloyd Pennington, who was charged with forgery for heavy amounts."

"He seemed bewildered by the charge, and his answers, so different in tone from his customary quick, frank business manner, only served to still further condemn him in the eyes of his father, cold and hard man of business."

"The proofs seemed terribly convincing. Any impartial jury must have sentenced as guilty any one brought before them with that weight of evidence against him. But Lloyd Pennington, as soon as he could recover from the first benumbing shock of such a terrible charge, stoutly declared his perfect innocence."

"Craig Pennington was, at best, a hard unsympathetic parent, and from the date of his

second marriage, when Lloyd was only a few years old, he had seemed to love his eldest son less and less, treating him with great strictness, which grew more severe as his second son, his only child by his last wife, gained in years. As the word goes, there was little love lost between Lloyd and his step-mother, and it was mainly her work that set the father so strongly against his eldest born."

"This dislike showed itself now, and the father would not give ear to the passionate denials of the accused. He acted as though he wished to believe him guilty, and while striving to avert open disgrace from falling upon his name, he punished the assumed criminal as severely as lay in his power."

"Lloyd Pennington went out of that office, bearing on his head the bitter curses of his father who forbade his ever entering his old home, forbade his ever speaking to one of the family, under penalty of being arrested and prosecuted as a forger."

"As I said, the proofs against him seemed terribly clear, and Lloyd Pennington could only bow to the sentence passed upon him by his stern parent. He knew that he could not clear himself in the eyes of the law, and from that day he was never seen near his old home. He disappeared as completely as though he had never existed. His name was never mentioned by his relatives. It was as though he was dead and buried."

"Stephen Pennington offered to assume one-half of the losses consequent upon the forgeries, but Craig Pennington was honest, if so cold-hearted, and refused to permit this. The sums were so heavy that he was severely crippled, and from that day on he was only given a third interest in the business, though only the partners themselves knew this."

Medea paused to catch breath. A short, hard laugh came from the lips of Monte Jim, who had been gravely listening.

"Do you wonder that I went wrong, with such a start in life?" he said, a mocking bitterness in his tones. "Is it a marvel to you, now, that I did not care to acknowledge the name of Lloyd Pennington?"

Medea covered her eyes with one hand, while the other made an imploring gesture toward the card sharp. Her voice was hoarse and strained as she gasped:

"Don't—pray don't! If you only knew how very hard you are making my task, you would have mercy!"

Even Monte Jim seemed startled and perplexed by her powerful agitation. He stammered:

"I beg your pardon—I didn't think—"

Her hand dropped, she flashed a keen glance into his face.

"But you *must* have known that the charge was false—that you were not guilty—only the scapegoat made to suffer for the crime of another! Surely you must have at least suspected who was the real criminal?"

"But I didn't—I pledge you my word, Miss Pennington. Of course, I knew that I never committed those forgeries, but for the life of me, I couldn't guess, even now, who did do it."

With an air that was almost defiant, Medea flung back her head and faced the card-sharp. Her face was pale as death, but there was no other sign of flinching, as she said:

"My father was the forger!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MONTE JIM DECLINES A BRIDE.

A BREATHLESS silence followed this announcement. Not one among those who heard the words but longed to console the poor girl, whose head was now bowed with grief and shame; but not one knew just how to set about doing so, with the others looking on.

"Well, this is all news to me," exclaimed Alva Pennington, who rather prided himself on his blunt straightforwardness. "And so it was uncle Steve who got the chestnuts? Well, well, and I used to look on him as one of the elect! He seemed so good and holy that I don't believe I'd have thought it at all out of the way if I had seen the pin feathers begin to sprout on his shoulders."

"Drop that, *you*!" muttered Monte Jim, with an angry look toward the speaker, as the bowed figure of the maiden perceptibly quivered, the coarse words and coarser tone cutting her wounded feelings to the very quick.

"It is nothing but the truth," said Medea, suddenly recovering from her brief prostration, lifting her pale face, choking back the tears which rendered her voice so husky and uncertain. "Say plainly what you think. It is part of the punishment which follows every crime."

"But don't light on the right shoulders every time," impulsively cried Monte Jim, his big blue eyes all aglow. "If you had been the one who uttered those forgeries, there might be some little justice in it; but when you're innocent as a babe unborn—devil fly away with such justice as that!"

"It is nothing compared to what you must have endured all these years, bearing the weight of another's crime. In place of pitying, you should rather curse me, as the child of the man who cast upon your young shoulders the load

of crime which he should have borne himself—who blasted your prospects, and turned you out upon the world an outcast!"

"The worst crime your father ever committed, was when he made you swear to tell this story," earnestly uttered Monte Jim. "For the forgeries, for his false swearing, I could forgive him, easily enough; but never this. He had no right to ask such a bitter sacrifice of you; and could I have imagined what it was you meant to say, I should have refused to listen. As it is, I beg of you to say no more."

"Or, if you must, wait until to-morrow," urged Alva Pennington, suspecting that both Medea and Monte Jim were too powerfully moved for his interests to be perfectly safe in the hands of the card-sharp, even though he had pledged his word to refuse the offer which the maiden was bound to make.

"Since I have begun, I will finish," said Medea, struggling to recover her composure. "If you flee from me now, I could never find courage to confront you again, and there remains much for me to say before I can feel that I have kept the sacred charge left me by my poor father. In addition to this, I ask another favor of you, Lloyd Pennington."

"It is granted before uttering, Miss Pennington."

"Thank you. It is this—that you will hear me through without further interruption. I know you did not mean it, but your laugh, and your bitter words just now pained me more than if you had driven a dagger to my heart, and makes my task a very hard one to perform, I assure you."

"I most humbly beg your pardon, Miss Pennington," stammered Monte Jim, his handsome countenance flushing hotly. "I'll bite off my tongue and swallow it, before it offends you again. I'm a rough, ignorant brute, at the best, but I'd rather lose a hand than to give you one unnecessary pang."

"Of course you would, and so would all of us," cried Alva Pennington, shifting nervously on his seat, his anxiety increasing with the exchange of each sentence. "I beg of you, Medea, to leave the rest in my hands. Let me tell Brother Lloyd what remains to be told, while you go and lie down. First thing you know, you'll be down sick."

But the maiden shook her head, with a wan smile.

"I alone can tell the story, cousin. You hardly understand the mere outline. Besides, I am bound by my oath to tell all, and make full confession in the name of the dead!"

"Yes: my father, Stephen Pennington, was the forger! He confessed all to me while lying on his death-bed, and now I will try to make his motives clear to you."

"Against the better judgment of his half-brother, he entered extensively into speculations that promised immense profits, and in the end he lost heavily, though only the brokers he employed suspected the truth. To cover these losses, Stephen Pennington took the first step along the dark path, hoping to make restitution before his evil deeds could be discovered. In this he was disappointed, and matters went from bad to worse with him, until only a remote chance lay between him and discovery. He dared not trust entirely to this, lest it fail him so suddenly that he would be unable to save anything from the wreck; and then it was that he set the trap into which you, Lloyd Pennington, fell through no sin of yours."

"He made it appear that for months you had been issuing false paper for heavy sums, really intending at the time to take these up again and destroy them, should his last hope turn out as profitable as he firmly believed; but the fates willed it otherwise."

"He received a telegram from a man with whom the firm did business, into whose hands one of the forgeries had fallen, and whose suspicions were aroused. He hastened home, and saw that the blow could no longer be averted. It was either his ruin, or that of the scapegoat whom he had selected to bear the burden of his sins—and you know the decision he made."

"One week later Stephen Pennington was richer than he had ever been, for his forlorn hope proved even more profitable than he had dared dream of; but the blow had fallen, and he dared not tell the truth."

"It is very hard to utter such terrible truths of one's own parent; the more so when, until that black history was whispered for the first time, one has believed in his truth, uprightness, and honor, as one believes in the Bible! Terribly hard—but even as death claimed his spirit, he reminded me of the sacred oath I had taken, to tell all, without reserve."

"From first to last, the Penningtons have been a strange race. Their loves and hates have been very strong, but they rarely found vent in the usual channels. There have always been dissensions between them, and though they were partners in business for many years, the case of my father and his half-brother was not an exception to the general rule."

"After that first step along the downward path, it was easier for Stephen Pennington to continue than to retrace his steps. With his

wealth his avarice grew, and as he was now the leading partner in the firm, he had ample opportunities given him by which he could readily defraud his brother. Little by little, so guardedly that the most searching examination could detect nothing of his frauds, he pushed Craig Pennington still nearer the brink of ruin. At the same time, though it seemed that his own losses were still greater, he was storing up wealth like a miser.

"That is sufficient. I cannot tell you all, as it came about. I was heartsick when I first heard it—I am heartsick now that I attempt to convey the same to you.

"Enough that all unsuspecting the truth, Craig Pennington was ruined by his own brother, and when the crash came, it proved more than he could bear. He surrendered everything to his creditors, took to his bed, and never left it in life.

"Men said that Stephen Pennington acted most nobly, assuming far more than his share of the losses. The misfortunes which overwhelmed the firm were generally attributed to the rashness of Craig Pennington, and when the business was finally settled up, there were scores of rich men who insisted on re-establishing my father in business.

"Then the time came when death laid its hand heavily on him, and when he became convinced that his last earthly hope was gone, he called me to his bedside, and confessed all his crimes, making me swear to make what restitution was possible.

"He admitted the forgeries, and gave his reasons for fixing on you, Lloyd Pennington, in preference to any other, as the scapegoat. He believed you suspected something of his evil practices, and that you were on the point of denouncing him to your father. He saw only the one way of saving himself, and he took it without leaving you a single loop-hole to escapes.

"Now, as he lay dying, he wished to make what amends lay in his power. No person, outside of the family, knew why you so suddenly fled from home. No one even suspected that you did so under a cloud. Therefore it would not be necessary to publish his crime to the world, unless you should insist on doing so, as part recompense for the unmerited punishment you had been forced to bear. Then, and then only, I was to give to the public a full, written confession of his past crimes. If you did not insist on this, I was to surrender into your hands all the property of which he died possessed, unless—"

Here her voice faltered, and her eyes sunk to the floor.

Alva Pennington fidgeted uneasily on his chair, trying to catch the eye of Monte Jim, who persistently avoided his gaze, looking steadily at the reddening countenance of the maiden, his eyes glittering vividly.

"He made a will I suppose?" he uttered, at length, as Medea still maintained silence. "You don't happen to have a copy of that with you, of course?"

Medea suddenly lifted her head, gazing fully into his glowing eyes, her face turning very pale, though her voice was firm and even as she spoke again:

"I have a copy of the portions which more nearly concern you, Mr. Pennington. I will let you see them, when I have finished what I have to say."

"I only thought a glance at that would spare you from uttering words that may be hard to speak," he said, quietly.

"It is all hard enough, Heaven knows!" with a bitterness that she had not yet exhibited. "But there is no alternative left me. I swore to carry out his wishes, and I will do so without evasion or false shame.

"In that will, my father left his entire fortune to you, provided you would accept my hand in marriage. If you refused to do this, you were to receive one-half the money, and the other moiety was to become mine. That there might be no possible chance for misunderstanding, I was to put the question plainly to you—and I obey his wishes, thus:

"Lloyd Pennington, will you marry me?"

As she uttered these words Medea rose from her chair and took a step toward Monte Jim, holding out one hand, looking straight into his glowing eyes. Her voice was calm, her features composed, though as pale as death itself.

Through all this, Will Rice had listened with a breathless interest that may be imagined, after his ardent confession of love, only a few hours earlier in the same evening, but now, as he saw Monte Jim grasp the proffered hand, he could bear no more, but caught up his hat and hastily rushed from the room.

Alva Pennington, fairly ghastly in his great fear lest his new-found brother should prove too weak to resist the temptation thus deliberately placed before him, sat in agony, waiting for the end.

Monte Jim clasped the white hand in both of his own, looking keenly into the lustrous eyes which were raised to meet his. And when he spoke there was a perceptible tremor in his voice:

"Suppose I were to say the whole world con-

tains no gift one half so precious to me as this little hand, Medea?"

"It is yours for life, if you care to claim it, Lloyd," was the low reply. "I make the offer. It is for you to accept or decline. It is a poor reward for all you have suffered in these long years through the crime of my father."

As she ceased speaking there was utter silence for a few moments. Monte Jim gazed into those lustrous eyes as though unable to break the spell; but not for long. Then, releasing the hand he held, he stepped back a pace and put both hands behind him, as though the better to resist temptation.

"My dear child, it is a priceless treasure you are offering me, and if I were a better man, or a greater scoundrel, I would hold you to that pledge. It would be little short of heaven—your love!"

She made no reply, but shrunk back a little, as though alarmed by the intense earnestness with which he spoke.

Monte Jim saw this, and his mood seemed instantly to change, a light laugh breaking from his lips as he said:

"Unluckily for me, I must respectfully decline the honor. I am already a married man—have a wife, and the good Lord only knows how many little olive branches! They would seriously object. You would rather not, and Alva, here, would surely blow out what few brains he has if I married you, for, unless all signs lie, the poor devil is over head and ears in love with my charming cousin!

"As for the wrongs which your father may or may not have done me in the past, we'll call that square, for the sake of his lovely daughter, who has so bravely tried to make what amends lay in her power. Of one thing you can rest assured: I will never reproach either him or you with the past.

"As for the fortune, you must give me two days in which to weigh the matter. Then I will come to you with my decision."

He moved forward and took both her hands in his, stooping until his lips touched her forehead, gravely, reverently.

"Allow me—as a cousin, only!" he muttered, as she seemed to shrink from the caress. "And now, good-night. You must seek some rest. May the angels guard you!" and, dropping her hands Monte Jim turned and hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CURLY KAINE ON THE WAR-PATH.

It was not long after that hurried exit, that Alva Pennington also parted with Medea for that night, and went out in quest of Monte Jim, toward whom he felt, just then, very grateful and brother-like indeed.

But he found him naught, either around the hotel or about town, as far as he cared to carry his quest on that night. In the morning the handsome card-sharp was still among the missing, and when that day passed and night again fell over Bismarck without his being able to find Monte Jim, Alva Pennington began to grow uneasy indeed. He almost believed that his newly-discovered brother had been waylaid and assassinated by some of his numerous enemies, who had cunningly disposed of his body and removed all other traces of their crime.

Hoping almost against hope, he again made the rounds of the town, dropping into the principal sporting-places, one after another, but as often failing to discover the object of his persistent search.

At length, weary from his constant tramping, Alva Pennington took a chair in a corner of one of the saloons, ordering liquor and a cigar, sipping the one and puffing slowly at the other, as he leaned an elbow on the little round table, puzzling his brain with wild conjectures concerning Monte Jim.

For a time he kept a close watch on the door, an expectant light coming into his eyes with each movement of the latticed screens which swung in the passageway, but at length he ceased to notice the men who passed in and out, his busy brain building castles in the air, busy planning his future life, in which Medea Pennington and her fortune played a most prominent part.

Thus it was that he was not immediately aware of the entrance of Curly Kaine, self-styled King of Bismarck.

The gambler entered the saloon with a swift stride, halting the moment he had passed the screens, his black eyes roving swiftly over the occupants, as though searching for some particular person whom he had reasons for believing would be present.

To those who knew him best, it was readily seen that the King of Bismarck was on the war-path and meant evil to some one, should a meeting chance to take place.

He had been drinking heavily ever since the row at the Clipper Shades, though the only perceptible effects of the strong liquor was a peculiar redness of his eyes and an almost ghastly pallor which took possession of his face. His walk was steady and lithe as ever. His speech was not affected in the least, while his nerves seemed to increase in steadiness and

strength the more poison he poured down his throat.

The saloon was crowded. Men were gathered before the bar, talking, laughing, cursing; others were seated at the small round tables, playing cards; but on the appearance of Curly Kaine, an instant silence fell over all, while an uneasy look came into more than one face, until it was made clear who the King of Bismarck was seeking—or at least on whose devoted head his present spite was about to fall.

This sudden silence aroused Alva Pennington from his musings, and he glanced around him with a lazy curiosity, little dreaming how nearly it concerned himself, even when he recognized Curly Kaine in the tall, athletic figure moving toward him with an insolent swagger. Not until the King of Bismarck passed the last row of tables and still advanced, did Alva Pennington begin to realize the truth.

He had seen a good deal of what is called "life," in the fast circles of large cities. He knew at a glance that the faro-dealer had been drinking heavily, though his face was so white, and his motions so steady. He knew, too, that such men are, as a rule, the most dangerous to cross when the devil in their nature is fully awakened. He saw that Curly Kaine meant mischief, but his square jaws only set themselves a little firmer, and he drew his feet more beneath his body, ready for sudden action should he be called upon.

Whatever his other faults, Alva Pennington was no physical coward, and was well able to hold his own in a common crowd. And, though he would have preferred being somewhere else, just then, it was not because he feared Curly Kaine.

The gambler halted just without arm's-length from the young man, his silk hat tipped forward on his head, so that he had to "look down his nose" in order to see Pennington. It was a peculiarly irritating attitude, and well matched by the insolent tone in which he called:

"Hello, youngster! where's your dry nurse this evening?"

Men forgot their glasses, threw up their cards, ceased their wordy disputes, baving eyes, thoughts only for the "show" which all firmly believed was on the point of coming off. The only doubt was as to whether this "tenderfoot" would show "sand" or take water off hand.

At the same time there was a silent haste to get their own precious persons "out of line" with the two men on whom all eyes were turned before cold lead should begin to fly.

Alva Pennington saw all this, and easily enough divined its meaning; but he saw, too, that Curly Kaine kept both hands buried to the wrists in the side pockets of his light sack coat, and believed that the athlete trusted to his greater weight and size to overawing him.

Outwardly cool as ice, he glanced up at the gambler, eying him as one might some natural curiosity, but making no reply to the insolent address.

A redder gleam came into the eyes of the King of Bismarck, but then an insolent laugh fell from his lips.

"Poor little devil! Too bad scared at the sound of a man's voice, to answer a simple question like that! Say, you!"

"Are you addressing me, or simply making an ass of yourself for the benefit of the company in general?" coolly asked Pennington, taking up his glass and sipping the liquor it still contained, his blue eyes mildly beaming on his adversary.

A little murmur of wonder and admiration ran around the group of spectators at this exhibition of nerve in chaffing the man whom the bravest among them all feared; and Curly Kaine himself seemed taken aback by the cool retort. Not for long, however. Then he spoke again:

"I was addressing you. I asked where you had hidden your dry-nurse, Monte Jim, as the animal calls himself. I'm out looking for him, and I mean business, chuck-up!"

"Why do you come to me, if you seek another?"

"Because I know you're too big a coward to venture very far from the fellow who has taken you under his wing. Some of his gang are here, and I know he is not far away. Ten to one he deduced under a table when he saw me coming."

"If you suspected anything like Monte Jim was within a mile of you, you'd break your neck with your heels, trying to find your hole before his boot-leather could overtake you. Talk is cheap, but I'm ready to let my pile that you dare not repeat those words, face to face with a man—and Monte Jim is one, just as sure as you are not!" boldly cried Pennington.

Again Curly Kaine was plainly taken aback. He expected more than a simple retort in words, when he uttered that degrading epithet, yet there was not a trace of anything like fear in the face or tones of the young man, who still sat easily in his chair.

A week ago, Curly Kaine would not have hesitated a moment in shooting down a man who would have dared utter such words to him; but the events of the past few days—the story of his insulting a lady on the train, and his exposure by Monte Jim when he attempted foul dealing—had awakened popular indignation,

and he feared for the consequence to himself, should he shed blood without at least a show of provocation on the part of his victim.

"Idiots and young kids are privileged to shoot off their mouths, for they know a grown man disdains to even spank them for their sauciness. Trot out Monte Jim, and I'll talk to him, if he's got sand enough to face the music!"

"You want to take another lesson in stocking cards, I suppose?" laughed Pennington, beginning to believe that this blustering bully was not so dangerous, after all.

Curly Kaine turned even paler than before, while his eyes glowed like coals of living fire as he snarled:

"Curse you, dog! Dare you even hint that I cheat?"

"I never hint. Facts speak for themselves."

"If you hint that I dealt foul, you're a dirty liar!"

Swift as thought, the thick-bottomed glass left the hand of Alva Pennington, striking the bully fair in the face, and splintering into a hundred fragments with the force of contact. He reeled back and almost fell to the floor, as his antagonist leaped to his feet, but before another movement could be made by Pennington, Curly Kaine fired a shot without drawing his hand from his pocket, and with a wild, gasping cry, the unfortunate young man staggered back, falling heavily to the floor, blood gushing in a torrent from his left breast.

"I call you to witness, gentlemen, that I shot him only in self-defense!" cried Curly Kaine, dashing the blood from his face, a pistol in each hand, as he glared around him.

"You lie, Curly Kaine! It was an unprovoked murder!" cried a clear voice, and the startled crowd fell hurriedly to either side, as they saw the tall figure of Monte Jim leaping toward the bleeding gambler.

A savage snarl broke from the murderer's lips as he recognized that voice, and wheeling swiftly he flung up both hands, two reports sounding almost as one.

Monte Jim crouched low, then leaped upon his rival, blood staining one cheek where the skin had been broken by one of the bullets. Before Curly Kaine could fire another shot, those steel-like fingers closed upon him, lifting his heavy form clear of the floor to a level with the card-sharp's head, then hurling him with terrible force to the floor, head-first.

One gasping moan from the lips of the gambler, then Monte Jim planted one foot upon his throat, as he confronted the crowd, a revolver in each hand, his eyes ablaze, his white face streaked with blood, his voice ringing out sharply:

"Back, you growling curs! This bully has committed foul murder on an unarmed man, after picking a quarrel with him, and as sure as there is a heaven above us! he shall die the death of a dog! I—Monte Jim—swear it!"

There were several of Curly Kaine's particular pets in the saloon, and as they beheld their chief handled so roughly, they drew their weapons as though resolved to avenge his fall on the bold card-sharp—but that was as far as they went.

They saw that Monte Jim also had backers who knew well how to use the tools they bore, and were only awaiting a signal from their leader to open the ball; while the card-sharp himself was a host. Sullenly they replaced their weapons and began to edge away from the fire that already seemed to scorch their fingers.

A single glance showed Monte Jim this much, and removing his foot from the neck of the insensible gambler, he knelt beside Alva Pennington, lifting his head to his knee.

A gurgling moan—the barely articulate name of Medea—then a gush of red blood from his lips—a convulsive quiver that ran along his limbs—then all was over.

Monte Jim gently lowered the head to the floor, then leaped to his feet, eyes aglow and face distorted with a savage rage that made him resemble some bloodthirsty demon rather than a man.

"The poor lad is dead—foully murdered by Curly Kaine without being given a chance to defend himself!" he cried, his voice hoarse and strained. "Shall we stand this, men? Shall we suffer this dirty dog to live and boast of his bloody deed? I for one, say no!"

"String the hound up to the fust tree!"

"Haul him out and get a rope! We'll serve the same sauce to all who tries to hinder the cause of justice!"

Blinky Scott uttered the first cry: Major Dave Poole the second; both members of Monte Jim's pet gang, but this fact was not noticed amid that intense excitement. The cry for blood once raised, it was easy enough to find men who would second the motion, and in less than a minute it seemed as though every man in the building was howling for the life of the assassin, crowding around, eager to aid in bearing him to the gallows.

But even then, when all was confusion and wildest excitement, Monte Jim proved himself a chief, and forced back all save men whom he could implicitly trust to carry out his wishes, no matter how deadly those might be.

The senseless gambler was caught up and borne out into the night, surrounded by a mob of howling, screaming, half-crazy roughs, their numbers being constantly augmented as the wild alarm spread over the town. But among them all, not one voice was raised for mercy.

To speak in his behalf now, would be almost certain suicide, and his warmest friends could only steal away before the same fate overtook them, or silently watch the tragedy.

A rope was procured, noosed and thrown over a stout sign in front of a grocery store. The loop was fitted around the neck of Curly Kaine, the touch seeming to recall his senses, for as he was rudely dragged to his feet, a cry of mingled fear and anger broke from his lips.

"Curse you all! let me loose! For love of heaven, gentlemen, have mercy!" was his mixed appeal, as he glared around him with his bloodshot eyes.

"Too late, Curly Kaine!" sternly replied Monte Jim, standing before him. "You have run to the end of your tether, and in this last foul murder—the assassination of an unarmed man—you have signed your own death-warrant! You have just five minutes in which to say your prayers, if you know any, and try to make your peace with Heaven."

"Spare me, boys—I appeal to you!" gasped the wretch, thoroughly cowed by the near presence of death. "I ain't fit to die! Give me time to repent—"

"We'd grow gray-headed if we waited for that!" came a coarse, mocking voice from the crowd.

Monte Jim turned angrily in that direction, but the words which were ready to sternly rebuke the unmanly taunt changed on his lips to a startled cry as he recognized the figure of a woman darting toward them.

"String him up, boys! There's no time to waste!"

With a wild cheer his order was obeyed, and the writhing figure of the gambler was drawn from the earth, men laughing fiercely as he caught at the choking rope with his unbound hands, striving to relieve that frightful strain.

A piercing shriek in a woman's voice came to their ears, and there was a startled surge of the mob that almost threw Monte Jim to the ground, completely illustrating his intention of intercepting the woman. And before he could recover or extricate himself Helen Brinston darted through the crowd and leaping into the air with marvelous activity, drew a sharp blade across the tightly-stretched rope, severing it and letting Curly Kaine drop to his feet again.

"Run, darling!" she panted, turning and facing the mob, which was thrown into still greater confusion as the men who were straining at the rope fell in a confused heap as it gave way. "Run—I'll cover your retreat!"

Monte Jim was darting forward, but she met him half-way, striking viciously at his heart. He interposed one arm, for the crowd was too great for him to fully elude the blow, and the blade pierced his forearm until its guard dented the flesh, so deadly was the woman's stroke.

With a sweep of his wounded arm, Monte Jim hurled her to one side, then leaped toward Curly Kaine, who had started in swift flight, the moment he touched ground. He was now clear of the crowd, running like a deer, heading for the shadows.

Monte Jim paused, raised his revolver and fired one shot.

Ten paces further would have carried the fugitive into the dense shadows where his figure would have been lost to view of his enemies, when escape would not have been impossible to one as active as he—but it was not so written.

With a single wild scream, he leaped high into the air, then fell to the ground in a quivering heap, stricken down by the bullet of his rival.

Helen Brinston recovered her footing just in time to see the shot, hear that frightful cry of agony, and witness the fall of the man for whose sake she had dared so much.

A wailing cry escaped her lips, as she darted to the spot where he lay, kneeling beside him, calling him by name, begging him to look up, to answer her, if only to say that she was recognized once before he died.

But not a word came in reply; only a gasping, rattling moan that was scarcely more than a breath that strove to find exit from those blood-clogged lungs.

Monte Jim had not wasted his lead, and snapshot though it was, it had laid Curly Kaine, King of Bismarck, forever low.

Monte Jim saw as much, and motioned the agitated crowd to fall back and give the bereaved woman room. As silently they obeyed, and when they witnessed her terrible grief, when they saw her seething tears and heard her broken appeals to the fallen man, more than one of that crowd, so lately howling for the life-blood of this man, stole silently away, ashamed of themselves, ashamed of the work they had aided in.

Suddenly the mood of the woman changed. She lowered the head of the gambler upon her handkerchief, which she first spread in the dust, then arose and confronted Monte Jim, in whose arm her knife was still sticking.

"You killed him, Monte Jim! Are you satisfied?" she demanded, her voice strangely even and clear.

"I did kill him; but it was to reward him for murdering my brother," was the calm, even response, as the card-sharp drew her weapon from his arm, and tightly wrapped a handkerchief around the wound.

"You killed him—the only man I ever loved in all my life—and yet I am about to ask a favor of you!" she added. "He is dying. Yet I cannot see him perish like a cur in the kennel! Help me carry him into the hotel yonder."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LLOYD PENNINGTON PASSES IN HIS CHECKS.

MONTA JIM followed the direction of her glance, and turned a shade paler as he saw that Helen Brinston meant the same place where Medea Pennington lodged. He could hardly have explained the feeling, but he was strongly loth to have the bleeding body of Curly Kaine carried there.

"Why there?" he asked, hurriedly adding: "Any other place will do as well, and I'll give the word—"

"Yonder, or leave him to die like a dog in the kennel!"

A rumbling growl came from the ever-fickle crowd, and knowing how little it would require to turn the same mad torrent against him, Monte Jim yielded to the woman's wish.

After all, what could it matter? Sooner or later Medea Pennington must know that he had again bathed his hands in human blood, and the fact that his victim lay beneath the same roof with her, would not make the affair any more abhorrent.

She would be too full of her own grief and horror, to give him and his affairs more than a passing thought, when the corpse of her cousin was brought home.

"You shall have your wish, Helen Brinston," he said, with a grave earnestness. "These men will bear Curly wherever you may direct, and I would aid them, if I thought you desired."

"You murdered him, and your touch would be profanation!" she cried, her eyes glowing luridly, her hands clinched as though she longed to bury her fingers in his throat.

Some day you'll see that I had to do it, my good woman," calmly replied Monte Jim, motioning some of his men to pick up the senseless figure and bear it away. "Just now you are too greatly excited to listen to reason."

Making a sign which his particular body-guard readily understood, Monte Jim turned away and retraced his steps to the saloon where Alva Pennington had met his death after such a terribly sudden and unexpected manner.

Directed by Helen Brinston, a door was hastily torn from its hinges, and upon this the body of Curly Kaine was placed. Then half a dozen strong men carefully picked up the ghastly burden and bore it steadily toward the hotel, from the porch before which honest Giles Dickson was watching them.

Without asking permission or uttering a word of apology, Helen Brinston brushed past the host, leading the way to the parlor, until then wholly deserted. At a motion from her the bearers deposited their burden on the floor, then drew back.

She sunk to her knees beside the wounded man, gently removing sufficient of his clothing to lay bare the little hole which marked the spot where Monte Jim's lead had entered. She carefully examined the wound, and traced the course of the bullet as well as she could under the circumstances, her face as pale as that of a corpse, but her hands as cool and steady as though this dying creature had been naught to her, instead of the one being in the whole wide world whom she loved.

She knew that there was no earthly hope for Curly Kaine, and for a moment her proud frame bowed until her burning lips touched his death-dewed brow. But then she drew herself erect with a cold, haughty air, speaking distinctly to the landlord:

"Go tell Miss Medea Pennington to come down to this room without a moment's unnecessary delay—you hear?"

Honest Giles was not a little taken aback by this sharp address. He knew who Helen Brinston was; knew what sort of character she bore, and the nature of the tie which had bound her and Curly Kaine together. Notwithstanding all this, he felt a rude sort of pity for the woman in her proud grief, and hesitated to do what he felt he must—deny her wishes in this respect, for surely there could be no reason why Miss Pennington should obey the peremptory summons of such an abandoned creature!

Helen Brinston read something of this in his troubled countenance, and sternly added:

"Do as I bid you, old man, unless you wish to have her bitter curses on your head as well as mine. Go tell her that a near relative—that her cousin, Lloyd Pennington—is lying here at the point of death and wishes to see her before he dies. Go I tell you—go!"

She spoke swiftly, imperiously, pushing him before her at the same time and Honest Giles no longer refused. He knew that his fair guest was deeply interested in a person called Lloyd

Pennington, and though he did not understand how Curly Kaine could be that person, he hastened up to the chamber of Medea Pennington, and delivered his startling message.

Medea had retired for the night, but she begged Honest Giles to wait while she dressed, trembling with a fear which she could hardly define, for that name conjured up the handsome face of Monte Jim, and she saw him lying cold in death. So terribly distinct was the vision that a wailing cry escaped her lips, and she covered her eyes to shut out the heart-sickening sight.

Leaning on the arm of Honest Giles, for she sadly required some such support, she entered the room just as Monte Jim returned from temporarily taring for the corpse of Alva Pennington, and entered the door opposite.

She started back as though suddenly confronted by a ghost, with a little, gasping cry of mingled wonder and delight that the card-sharp wholly misinterpreted. Believing it was an expression of horror and aversion, he removed his hat and stood with bowed head before her, the picture of humility.

Helen Brinston saw this little by-play, and a hard, vicious laugh parted her lips, as she confronted Medea Pennington.

"Ayl well you may start from that demon in horror, girl, for his hands are red with the life-blood of the man for whom you have sought so long and diligently. I warned you against him when we met last, but you refused to listen. I told you he was a demon incarnate; that sooner or later you would feel the weight of his evil powers. That much was the truth, even though all the rest was a lie.

"What do you mean? I don't understand!" faltered Medea, glancing bewilderingly from one face to another, shrinking back as she noticed the pain and terror-distorted countenance of the man who lay on the floor, like one dead.

Again that hard, blood-chilling laugh, as Helen Brinston noted this shrinking, and her eyes blazed anew as she cried:

"You shrink from him as though he had the plague! And yet that is the man whom you swore to never cease hunting until he was found; whom you swore to clear from an undeserved stigma—Lloyd Pennington, your cousin!"

"It's a darn shame!" muttered Honest Giles, catching the maiden in his sturdy arms as she staggered back, confused, stunned by this startling announcement. "If she wasn't a woman in shape I'd bun'le her out o' this so quick it'd make her p'izen head swim!"

"Hold your peace, you grizzly, overgrown baby!" sharply cautioned the virago, darting a spiteful glance into the hot face of the landlord. "Dare to interfere before I have completed the story I set out to tell, and I'll send a bullet in search of your brains. And you, Monte Jim, have got to stand up to the rack and take your fodder like a little man!"

With a cold bow the card-sharp seated himself.

"Child, listen to me," added the woman, her voice growing lower and more earnest as she turned to Medea, whom Honest Giles was supporting to a seat on the lounge. "I loved the man who lies there, dying—how entirely, how passionately, your milk-and-water nature can never begin to realize. He was my god in life, and now that he is dying, I place my hand upon his bosom and solemnly swear to you that all I am about to say is true as was my love for him!"

Kneeling beside the moribund, Helen Brinston rested her hand lightly upon his bosom, then lifted it above her head, dripping with blood, as she uttered these words:

"I lied to you the time you came to visit me, lured there by the cunning acting of Fatty Smith; shall I tell you why?"

"He—my love—saw you on the train which brought you to Bismarck. He was powerfully attracted by your baby face, and that night, while lying by my side, he repeatedly muttered your name in his dreams.

"I knew how weak was his nature, where pretty women were concerned, and I began to dread his deserting me entirely; for, I confess it, the ties which connected us were never sanctioned by law or gospel.

"I did not question or reproach him, for I knew that would only harden him against me. I set to work, all the same, and in Fatty Smith, who worshiped the ground my feet trod, I found the tool I needed.

"He was only too eager to serve me, and through him, I learned the prime object of your visit here. And just then I found another still more unscrupulous tool, in an old acquaintance of the long ago—Frank Lisle!

"He recognized me, and followed me home. He little suspected the truth, when he sought my assistance, and I kept my secret closely from him, pretending to be won over to his plans solely by his gold which he promised me in case his plot should succeed.

"He was madly in love with you, and wished you for his wife, apart from the fortune which you could bring him, if all went as he wished. He told me you were hunting for one Lloyd Pennington, in order to restore a vast fortune,

and to marry him, if he would accept your hand.

"That was sufficient to enlist me in the plot, heart and soul, for I knew that the real Lloyd Pennington, if discovered by you, would cast me to one side without a single regret, when such a double temptation presented itself.

"It was Frank Lisle's idea, putting Monte Jim in the shoes of the man you sought. He believed you would shrink in horror from such a character. But if you did not, Monte Jim was to be put out of the way before he could do any harm.

"More than that, Frank Lisle also doomed your cousin, Alva Pennington, whom he knew to be madly in love with you, and whom he feared you would learn to love, even if you did not do so already. With those two out of the way, he felt confident he could win your hand and fortune.

"You know now why I sent for you and told you that jumble of lies, putting you on the wrong scent. I had determined to improve on the plan of Frank Lisle's, and it was through my doing that Fatty Smith attempted to kill Monte Jim, before you could find him and tell him what you believed was the truth. He failed, as you know.

"Poor devil!" with a hard, metallic laugh. "He fondly fancied he was winning a wife by performing my bidding. For years, he had prosecuted his loathsome suit, but until this emergency, I only laughed him to scorn. Now I promised him whatever reward he chose to ask, when he could come back to me and give me undoubted proof that Monte Jim was dead.

"Had he succeeded—had he killed Monte Jim and returned to claim his reward—my knife was sharpened and my arm nerved to pierce his heart with pangs far keener than those of the love he protested!

"It was a cunningly laid plot, and study it closely as I might, I could not see how I could possibly fail of complete success. With you believing Monte Jim the real Lloyd Pennington; with him put out of the way forever; with Fatty Smith forever silenced as to the connection between us; I believed you would go your way, and never cross my path again. The man who was dearer than all the world besides to me, would soon forget that he even indulged in a wild fancy concerning you, and we would once more be perfectly happy.

"For all this I was working, and success seemed sure; but now—he lies there, dying—and I—"

Her voice grew unsteady, and as though ashamed of betraying such emotion before those whom she hated so bitterly, Helen Brinston turned from them to Curly Kaine.

Until now he had lain without motion, without sign of life other than an occasional faint, gasping moan; but now, as though electrified, he uttered a wild, horrible cry, and suddenly raised himself to a sitting posture, his face frightfully distorted, a stream of clotted blood gushing out of his mouth.

With a cry that sounded like an echo of his own, the woman who loved him so madly sprang to his side, only in time to catch his head as he fell back, dead!

Wildly she called to him, begging for one word, a single look to tell her that he recognized her—but then she realized the truth, and gently lowered his head to the floor, bending and pressing her lips to his.

She turned, her lips stained with his life-blood, her left hand pointing toward Medea Pennington, her voice hoarse and strained as she uttered the rapid words:

"He is dead, and all through you! Only for your coming, he would be alive and loving me as he had for long years! His blood rests on your head, and thus I avenge him!"

As the last fierce cry left her lips, her right hand came out from its concealment, claspng a revolver, and her final words were blended with the report as she fired straight at the heart of the bewildered girl.

Monte Jim gave a wild cry of warning, and leaped between them, but the crazed woman did not appear to notice this—did not give her intended victim a second look—but turned to the corpse of Curly Kaine, leaning across it and once more pressing the bloody lips with her own.

Then, before a hand could be lifted to hinder her desperate act, she pressed the still-smoking muzzle of the revolver to her temple, pulling the trigger and sending a bullet crashing through her own brain.

Without a sound or cry, she fell across the corpse of Curly Kaine—of the real Lloyd Pennington—stone dead!

CHAPTER XXIX.

MONTA JIM CLEARS HIS RECORD.

WITH a faint, gasping cry, Medea Pennington fell back on the couch, fainting, the horrible scene being too much for her already overtasked nerves.

It was a scene of the most intense confusion. At the double report, the men who were crowding the bar-room rushed through the doorway to the room of death, standing in mute horror. Honest Giles was completely bewildered, and

could do nothing. Monte Jim caught the fainting maiden in his arms, sharply calling for water, but no one seemed to hear or understand his words, and he lowered the graceful figure on the couch and sought the restorative himself.

As he came back, he sternly ordered the gaping crowd to hasten and remove the dead couple, fearing the effects on the weakening nerves of the maiden, should her gaze fall upon them when her senses returned.

In silence he was obeyed, and then, as Medea gave signs of recovering her senses, he drew back and motioned Honest Giles Dickson to take his place.

It was upon his face that the maiden's eyes first rested when they opened again to consciousness, and a sad smile came into his blue eyes as she shrunk back and averted her gaze—but only for an instant. Then she arose and approached him with outstretched hand, her voice faint and quivering as she spoke:

"You saved my life, and I thank you. Only for you, that terrible creature would have killed me, and—"

She paused in her speech with a low, gasping cry, as she noticed how terribly white was his countenance—as she saw how tightly he pressed one hand to his left side—as she noticed the red blood flowing through his fingers!

"God of mercy! you are wounded!" she gasped. "That shot—it struck you instead of me! You gave your life to save mine! And I never thought—"

"It is nothing," he interposed, with a faint smile, motioning her back. "Your life was valuable, mine worse than nothing. Besides, I owed you something for having consented to deceive you into thinking me the original Lloyd Pennington."

His voice grew fainter, but still that smile filled his great blue eyes—still he stood proudly erect, pressing back the hot blood that flowed with such terrible steadiness from his breast.

Will Rice hastily entered the room, and with a sobbing cry, Medea flung herself into his arms, tearfully begging him to aid the wounded man, to summon medical assistance.

"My dear lady, there's no use in making such a fuss over a trifle like this," laughed Monte Jim, deprecatingly. "I'm used to it, and a bullet or two more or less—"

Despite his iron will, he could not conclude the light speech, but staggered back against the wall, still smiling, and affecting to make light of his injury.

A doctor bustled in, summoned by one of Monte Jim's pet gang, but the card-sharp motioned him back, as he suffered himself to sink down upon the lounge.

"It's no use, D. c.," he muttered. "I've got it right where I live, and all your tinkering can't make me a sound man again. Don't bother—only give me some stuff to keep up my strength until I can make a first-class apology to the lady yonder. It's all you can do for me, now!"

Despite this, he was too faint to resist the firm but gentle examination which the doctor insisted on making; but a very brief scrutiny convinced the physician that Monte Jim was indeed beyond his powers of saving, and simply plugging up the wound, bandaging it tightly to check the terrible flow of blood, he gave the wounded man a stimulant, then stood aside.

"Thank you, Doc," smiled the card-sharp, with a slight nod. "I don't want to run you out, but as I've got a few words which I want to say on private business to this lady, if you will just step out and let the boys know I'm thinking of them it would be a favor to yours truly."

In a few moments the room was cleared of all save Monte Jim, Medea Pennington, and Will Rice. These two drew close to the lounge on which the wounded man lay, in obedience to a sign which he made. Then, in tones low but distinct, he spoke:

"Though men call me the Black Sheep of Bismarck, child, I don't want you to think of me when I'm gone, as a man without one single streak of white in his nature.

"It wasn't altogether my doings, this playing off Lloyd Pennington on you; but let me begin at the beginning.

"I am just what I told you; James Ince, a gambler, a man on whose hands rest many red stains which water can't wash off—No, no!" he cried, with sudden energy, jerking his hand away as the maiden caught it up and impulsively pressed it to her lips. "Not that! It's too red to touch lips as pure as yours! Don't—don't unman me before I tell all! It's hard enough to find words—my head is all of a whirl—I believe I am beginning to lose my nerve at last!"

A faint, hollow laugh escaped his lips as he motioned Rice to give him a drink of the stimulant prepared by the doctor before leaving the room of death.

"That does me good, and I'll make a fresh deal," he said, as his head again fell back.

"As I told you on the train, I once had a pard called Poker Pennington. I never knew his first name, for he was a stern, secretive man, who seldom spoke about himself or his past life. With one exception. He never tired, when he

and I were alone together, of talking about his younger brother, Al, he called him; never by any other name.

"He said he had not seen him for years; did not know whether he was alive or dead; that he could never go back to the old home, and never expected to ever meet one of his kindred again. But he made me solemnly swear that if I ever met a young man called Al Pennington, to treat him white in memory of my old pard. I did swear, and I repeated the vow when I knelt over the grave where Poker was buried.

"Now you know why I took such a deep interest in your cousin, Alva Pennington, child. I believed him the brother of my old pard, and when he came to me and claimed me as his long-lost brother—when he begged of me to see you and refuse the offer which you had sworn to make—when he solemnly swore that he would blow his brains out if any other man ever wedded you—you can see the motive which led me to permitting you to believe me Lloyd Pennington.

"I declined your hand, lying when I said I was married; I meant to refuse all share in the fortune, simply urging as a reward that you smile upon Alva—but that is all over now.

"I could see no harm in taking that name for a little while, for if this was the brother of my dead pard, Poker must have been the Lloyd you sought, and he was dead. So I was not cheating anybody out of their rights—and I had sworn I'd serve little Al if it ever lay in my power—and I was a Black Sheep, anyway—a lie or two more wouldn't hurt my morals—Play fair, Curly! Cae card at a time, if you please!"

A painful sob broke from Medea, and Rice hastened to hold the glass to the lips of the card-sharp, whose mind was beginning to wander. But Monte Jim feebly motioned it away.

"I've told all—and it can't do me any more good. The game is about ended—and she caught the turn on me, sure!"

Sobbing bitterly, Medea Pennington knelt beside him. He gently—almost reverently—touched her hair with one white hand, then swiftly raised it to his lips, laughing faintly as he caught the moist eye of Will Rice.

"Don't begrudge me that little, old fellow. If you only knew what a terrible temptation it was—when she said those words—and her hand in mine—her eyes looking so bravely up at me—when I knew that I had only to break my word and accept her offer! But I didn't say it. I kept my faith to the lad—I didn't go back on the word I gave my old pard! You can set that down to my credit, anyway.

"But—somehow I can't catch the words I want—they dodge me, and I find I'm saying something else.

"Give me your hands—as a favor—sol" and he placed them together, holding them thus with both of his. "Treat her white, old fellow, or I'll come back and haunt you till your hair turns gray! Poor Al 'won't object now—she loves you—you love her—I saw it all, last night.

"And now—lady—if you wouldn't mind," he gasped, painfully, wistfully. "Nobody but us three need ever know—and you could soon rub the stain off—after I'm gone—"

With a sobbing cry, Medea Pennington bent over him and pressed her lips to his—not once, but repeatedly.

A glorious smile came over his white face, and his great blue eyes shone brilliantly.

And then—Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck, died.

There remains but little more to add to our tale.

Before she left Bismarck, Medea Pennington caused a plain marble shaft to be erected above the mortal remains of the man who had given his life to preserve hers. It told nothing to the stranger, save his name and the date of his death, but while life lasts, at least two persons will never think of the man whom his enemies called Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck, without a tear dimming their eyes, and a prayer for his future happiness in the spirit-land passing their lips.

Those two are Will Rice and his beautiful wife, the lady whom we have known as Medea Pennington.

THE END.

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